Scorched Scraps and Tatters

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/5457680.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

Categories:
Gen, M/M, F/F

Fandom:
Undertale (Video Game)

Relationships:
Eventual Sans/Grillby, eventual Undyne/Alphys

Characters:
Sans (Undertale), Papyrus (Undertale), Flowey (Undertale), Undyne (Undertale), Alphys (Undertale), Grillby (Undertale), Dogamy (Undertale), Dogaressa (Undertale), Woshua (Undertale), Mettaton (Undertale), Napstablook, Toriel (Undertale)

Additional Tags:
Sans Needs A Hug, Cinnamon Roll Papyrus, Sad Sans, Sans Has Issues, Psychological Trauma, Demonic Possession, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Psychological Torture, Aftermath of Torture, Flashbacks, Past Torture, Dissociation, Depression, Self-Harm, Suicidal Thoughts, Flowey Is A Dick, Disfigurement, Scars, Eye Trauma, Body Horror, Mind Rape, Broken Bones, Recovery, Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Friendship, Developing Relationship, Falling In Love, Minor Alphys/Undyne, Post-Neutral Route (Undertale), Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Hopeful Ending, Happy Ending, Possessed Sans, First Kiss

Language:
English

Stats:
Published: 2015-12-19 Completed: 2016-03-12 Words: 55,784 Chapters: 11/11

Scorched Scraps and Tatters

by CatKing_Catkin

Summary

The human never killed, but they also never returned. Flowey never regained the power to RESET, but he also never lost his urge to try new things, no matter who it breaks in the process.

Denied the chance to get his old body back, Flowey decided to take one for himself. In the end, he settled on Sans.

Sans' friends come together to get him back. That turns out to be the easy part, because having your body hijacked by an evil flower isn't an experience anyone passes through unscathed in body or soul. The hard part is picking up the pieces of their friend and helping Sans fit himself back together.

Fortunately, he soon discovers that the people in his life aren't the sort of monsters to back down from a challenge.

Notes

Oh boy. This fic.

This fic has mutated beyond the two audio pieces that inspired it (the part linked here in the fic, and the previous part linked in that part). But they were definitely what inspired it - sushinfood's dialogue and ideas and just the hints you get of what's going on with audio alone inspired me to put words to it. I was surprised at what I found, in the characters, and maybe a little in me.

Of course, writing this kind of subject matter was emotionally exhausting as all hell, to the point that I legit didn't think I could spin out a fic starting from Part 1. So my thoughts moved to what I thought might be lighter subject matter - how Sans might recover from such an event. How everyone would help him. What that would entail. How he would get better, because I was determined, as it were, to make certain that he did. And so I started from there. I confess, the idea of telling a story backwards is also one that's often fascinated me.

I'm not sure if this fic wound up being any easier - there had to be a lot of thinking about the trauma in order to address the

recovery - but it's definitely turned into something more than I could ever have anticipated. Fundamentally, however, this is a story about recovery. I like to think I learned some things writing it. I hope you enjoy the results.

(Those of you who follow me on tumblr might recognize a few pieces here and there. I try to bundle them with new stuff where I can.

Also, just as a reference - italics with proper capitalization are all Flowey's normal voice. Bolded, Flowey's creepy voice. Italics in lowercase are Sans' voice echoing with Flowey's voice. Full lowercase is Sans' voice, whether it's his choice to be talking or not.)

- Inspired by Where Everybody Knows Your Name by sushinfood

Here They Were

So here they were.

No one knew just how Sans had been taken over by a flower, not even Papyrus. No one had even known that it had happened, until the flower had made the mistake of trying to hurt Papyrus. Sans had broken two ribs resisting, and Papyrus had gotten away.

Word had spread from there. A lot of monsters listened to Papyrus, now that he was the only remaining member of the Royal Guard. A lot of monsters liked Sans. Papyrus' first priority had been, quite simply, to make sure that the flower didn't use his brother's face to hurt anyone.

It was too early to know for certain, but signs seemed to point to his success in that regard. Sans had been denied any easy targets besides Papyrus, who was somehow only just ever a few steps ahead. So Sans - or maybe the creature taking root in his body, or maybe both of them acting together for very different reasons - had chased after Papyrus. The flower wanted someone to hurt. Sans wanted his brother's help.

So here they were in Hotland, and with its long, narrow paths brightly lit with lava below, there was nowhere for Papyrus to go but onwards, nowhere for Sans to go but towards. The flower buried deep inside his skull called out taunts all the while, that almost sounded as though they came in Sans' voice. Almost, but not quite - the words echoed with the harmonics of something cold, cruel, and evil.

"this is probably the most your trashbag brother has ever moved in his life, papyrus! and he's tired, he's so tired. i can feel him trying to hold me back from crushing your stupid grinning skull under his feet, and guess what? ***it's not going to work this time.****"*

Papyrus didn't reply. Papyrus only ran, fast but never quite fast enough.

"but it's your own fault! do you know why it's been so easy for me to chase after you? it's because sans still wants to *. he wants you to help him, and you keep abandoning him! you left him back there in the ruins with me, and now here we are again!"*

Here they were.

And Flowey didn't realize until too late that the sound of the floor beneath Sans' feet had changed.

He looked down to see tiles, in shades of grey and white. He looked up to see Papyrus, now standing and facing him just a few yards away, looking back at him and *grinning*.

"w-what's going on?" Flowey asked, and this time the question came entirely in Sans' voice. He hadn't been lying, after all - Sans really was so, so tired, nothing more than a whisper in the back of his own head where Flowey had ruthlessly beat him into a corner. The tattered scraps of the skeleton's soul really were trying, straining, fighting to hold Flowey back from Papyrus. Yet the raw and bleeding center of him was nevertheless screaming in the same breath for his brother to come and help him.

Those tattered scraps of soul grew warm and bright and worryingly strong, as Papyrus struck a dramatic pose and laughed.

"FLOWEY," said Papyrus. "OF ALL THE THINGS YOU'VE DONE, I THINK THIS MIGHT BE THE MOST DISAPPOINTING. YOU REALLY WERE MY FRIEND, ONCE - BUT AFTER ALL THE TIME WE SPENT TOGETHER, YOU STILL THINK THAT I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WOULD EVER ABANDON MY BROTHER? NYEH-HEH-HEH! THAT IS THE MOST RIDICULOUS THING I'VE EVER HEARD - AND I'VE HEARD EVERY ONE OF SANS' PUNS!"

Sans had been very, very quiet for the last long while, which had left Flowey confident that he would soon have complete control of the body. It had even been growing steadily easier to pick through Sans' memories, to use them for his own as he would.

In his shock, in his *hope*, Sans' defenses were suddenly even weaker, and Flowey shared his realization all in a rush.

we're on a puzzle ***we're on a puzzle*** *maybe he really does have a plan...*

Flowey took another look at the tiled ground, feeling panic boiling up through his roots. They were facing off against *Papyrus*, on a *puzzle*.

Uh-oh.

He didn't want to turn and run. He'd been running long enough, and even if it had let him lock down control over his new body, Flowey

had only ever wanted this body so he could have some new and interesting ways to *kill people*. Or, more specifically, so he could make his old enemy kill people in new and interesting ways.

But maybe he could bring this body to run a little further after all. Flowey turned Sans around and started back the way they'd come.

"Nuh-uh!"

There was a figure with a gleaming smile and an equally gleaming spear held in hand, standing back at the other end of the puzzle. "Alphys!" Undyne called, racing forward. "Hit the switch!"

Then a voice called back, faint on its own, but echoing along the narrow path in the vast cavern. "Got it!"

There was the sound of a switch being flipped, and the tiles beneath their feet exploded in a flashing blaze of various colors, red and green and blue and pink and black...

wait, Sans wondered. *what did black tiles do?*

Don't ask me, idiot! You're supposed to know about your brother's stupid puzzles!

He felt Sans smile. He felt the threat of the future crawling on his stolen back. *guess we'll find out together.*

Flowey looked forward and back, still held safe for the moment behind Sans' eyes. Papyrus and, apparently, Alphys blocked the way forward. Undyne had vanished from the path behind, but that didn't necessarily mean anything, knowing even just what he knew about Undyne. Could he make it back there and off the tiles before the puzzle settled?

***Jump** jump jump! **Listen** to me, this is **my** body now...*

Appallingly, Sans managed to dig in his heels. He didn't manage much - Flowey still managed to jump, but then it was like tripping over his own roots, so that when the world blurred back into focus he was still on one of the tiles at the very, very edge of the puzzle, just as the puzzle itself settled into being.

The tile beneath his feet darkened to black. Flowey looked back up the path to see Papyrus racing back towards them, effortlessly navigating the puzzle itself. Or so Flowey assumed, having no idea how the

puzzle itself worked. Taking the path back that way would require going through Papyrus.

Not that that was necessarily a problem. Flowey was willing to do that, willing to end this right now if Papyrus was going to race headlong into his vines. Sans was so tired, keeping Flowey here had left him as little more than a fly crawling along Flowey's stem. Now was the time. ***Now is the time.***

Watch. For all the trouble you've caused me, for all the times you've defied me, ***you will watch while I do this****. You will watch him die by your hand and feel your LV go up from his dust!*

Flowey tried to lunge forward, bringing vines looping up and over the pathway...

...only to be stopped dead in his tracks, feeling Sans' soul turned green, and Sans' body rooted to the tile as a result as surely as any of Flowey's roots could have done. A shield appeared on the skeleton's arm. *"what?!"*

A tile two up and three to the right was filled with clear blue water. A shadow rose up through it and surfaced with a splash, and Undyne was there, her arms braced on the pink tile in front of her. "Hey, loser! Going somewhere?"

"WITH MY BROTHER'S SOUL TURNED GREEN, HE IS GOING NOWHERE AT ALL...EXCEPT FAR AWAY FROM SANS!"

"oh, yeah?" Flowey demanded, raising his arms and summoning a flurry of bones at the ready. *"what are you gonna do? beat me out of him? i'm sure i don't need to remind you how much HP your brother has, papyrus! even if i let you just stand here and hit me, you'd only be hurting him!"* He grinned, as wide as he could, until Sans' skull hurt with it. *"so go ahead! come and get me!* ***sans*** *would be just fine with that - do you have any idea how long he's wanted to* ***die*** *just to get away from me?!"*

it's okay papyrus i understand i understand you have to keep everyone safe i don't want to hurt anyone...

But Sans had to watch, as Flowey sent a line of bones spinning in two arcs away from him, one aimed at Papyrus and one at Undyne. It didn't do much to them, not yet - Undyne ducked down beneath the water, and Papyrus blocked each of Sans' bones with one of his own. But it drove the point home for Sans that he was no longer strong enough to stop Flowey.

"You're right," Undyne said, surfacing with barely a breath. "If either of us managed to hit Sans, he'd die. He's kind of a wimp like that - no offense, Papyrus."

"NONE TAKEN. AND I'M SURE MY BROTHER AGREES."

she's got a point.

"But that's only the damage his soul could take. His *body's* a bit more resilient than that."

Flowey brought a rain of bones tumbling down towards the water. Rather than hop to another tile, Undyne ducked down beneath the water again, darting this way and that within the confined space. But they saw, from the way the darting blur faltered and twisted for a moment, that she didn't quite succeed.

"so you plan on attacking me without attacking me? brilliant *plan, geniuses!"*

"THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT WE PLAN ON DOING!"

Undyne surfaced once more, not without a wince, her arm visibly dragging a bit. "Papyrus. Tell him about the puzzle."

"RED TILES ARE IMPASSABLE. YOU CAN'T WALK ON THEM. GREEN TILES ARE ALARM TILES..."

"Papyrus. Tell him about the *black* tiles."

"OH, RIGHT! BLACK TILES ARE WILD CARDS! DOCTOR ALPHYS CAN PROGRAM THEM TO DO ANYTHING THAT MIGHT BE REQUIRED!"

"And Sans' old friend Grillby had some ideas about what might be required." Undyne's gaze grew hard, and her smile was as sharp as her spear. "You stopped by and said hello to Grillby, didn't you, you sack of fertilizer food?"

They both remembered. For just a moment, the thoughts of Flowey and his prisoner were entirely in-line for entirely different reasons.

'I am aware of what I would have to do to get to you through Sans. Bone is more resilient than you'd think...but plant matter is another matter altogether.'

No.

yes.

In the end, he hadn't gone through it with it. In the end, he'd still been too afraid of hurting his friend to act, and they'd made him pay for it. But a machine couldn't have hostile intentions. A machine could damage the body, but not the soul. HP wouldn't enter into it - it was just a matter of whether Sans would burn to ashes before Flowey. If he did, his soul would break anyway, of course, but...

"Light him up, Alphys!" Undyne called.

Flowey put all his effort into Sans' voice, as he felt the ground beneath his sneakers grow warmer and warmer. "papyrus, w-wait! please, you know i'm not strong enough to take this. there must be another way, please, you're my brother, why won't you protect me...!"

Papyrus folded his arms and hunched his shoulders, but he didn't look away. Undyne looked to him, her expression flickering with sympathy for a moment. "Papyrus, you know you don't have to watch this..."

"YES, I DO. BECAUSE I WANT SANS TO KNOW THAT I'M HERE FOR HIM. I WANT HIM TO KNOW THAT I KNOW THAT HE'S GOING TO BE OKAY, AND WHEN ALL OF THIS IS DONE, I'M GOING TO TAKE HIM HOME AND JUST THIS ONCE, I'LL EVEN LET HIM EAT ALL THE TERRIBLE AND UNHEALTHY FOOD HE WANTS."

He looked up at Sans, looked through Flowey to his brother's soul where it was trapped in a prison of thorns and vines, and Papyrus smiled. It wasn't his usual grand, dramatic gesture, but the expression shone with just as much sincerity and open, genuine hope.

Flames sprouted from the tile beneath their feet, licking higher and higher, and Flowey felt his leaves begin to scorch.

Sans, however, had never felt stronger. There was no one more determined than those who had nothing left to lose, and now they couldn't look out at the world without seeing *flames* and it was hot, it was so, so hot, their bones were scorching and their roots were *burning...*

Flowey dug his thorns into body and soul. ***Jump!***

Sans felt the pain and Flowey heard him laugh. ***no.*** *you want me? stay here and* ***burn*** *with me.*

You really think you're strong enough to take this? You really think they

won't burn you alive, even if they don't mean to? ***No.*** *You're...you're just bluffing! You won't* really *let yourself die here...will you?*

do you really want to make that bet with me, kid?

Papyrus didn't look away. He didn't so much as blink. Undyne heaved herself up and out of the water, and hopped over to stand beside him for the sake of resting a hand on her friend's shoulder. He leaned a little into her touch, but gave no other acknowledgement. Even he probably couldn't have made himself heard as Flowey screamed, and made Sans scream with him.

* * *

"Hi there."

It was…a voice, and it was a familiar voice. The shadows at the edge of the passageway looked like they were the right shape. But it wasn't Sans' voice.

Papyrus strode nearer anyway. Whoever was down there, he couldn't see their eyes, but he could feel their gaze all the same as they watched him approach. It couldn't have been Sans. Sans' eyelights weren't as bright as his brothers', but they were still visible enough even in weak light.

"I'm your best friend."

The passageway opened up into a small room of sorts just a few more feet along. Light shone down from above, grey and weak and strange. Despite himself, despite the urgency and the sense of danger that even he could no longer ignore, Papyrus looked up to see the source of it.

He felt the space between his ribs tighten after a moment of wonder. The sky. *They were somewhere beneath a hole that opened up into the outside world, and the source of the light was coming from outside. It wasn't just light, but rain, too, like the sort that fell eternally inside the caverns of Waterfall. Had this hole always been here? Had he always been this close to seeing the sky, just blocked by the doors that had sealed away the Queen?*

There was light shining from within the cavern as well. It seemed unnaturally bright in contrast to the light from above, especially since it shone a brighter gold.

His gaze slid down, and other details made themselves apparent. Like… vines. There were lots and lots of vines, creeping up the walls of the cavern,

extending out from…

"…SANS?"

"Sans," *his brother agreed with an easy nod, in a voice that wasn't his. He spread his arms, grinning widely, as though he'd just performed a good prank. More vines were visible beneath his shirt as he moved, peeking out of his sleeves, all but covering his shoes.* "The skeleton! No use fighting, **you're mine now.**"

At first, Papyrus thought wildly that his brother who wasn't his brother was talking to him. Then he saw that Sans' right arm was twitching, straining as the plants wound tighter. Vines were creeping out of his empty right eyesocket. For a moment, just a moment, the smaller skeleton shuddered and shook and panted with exhaustion and visible pain.

This was *Sans, and Sans was trying to reach out to him. But something was holding him back.*

"SANS!" Papyrus cried, reaching back, wanting to help but still too shocked to know what to do. If this were anyone else, anything else, they would already be pinned to the ground, battered by bones, but it wasn't *anyone else.*

"I just want to make sure…that you know…" *the voice continued, not Sans' voice but speaking from inside Sans and so, so familiar anyway. Distracted. The voice sounded distracted as it…as it…*

His brother's struggles stilled once more. Wildly, Papyrus found himself thinking of the last time one of his favorite action figures had run out of batteries, the way it had sputtered and stumbled before growing inevitably still. He shook the thought out of his head, but the reality of the matter was little better.

Vines were creeping up out of the top of Sans' shirt, now, twining around his spine. "...you'll never see him again."

"NO!" Papyrus yelled, defiant and despairing in the same breath. No amount of hesitation or concern could have held him back, then - he leapt, swiping his hand through the air to summon up his blue attack. It was the only thing he could think of to do that wouldn't hurt Sans but might hurt this thing and he had to do something .

Unfortunately, paralyzed with horror and dread as he'd been, the invader had been acting. Roots and branches had sprouted up from the ground, over his boots, tangling and tripping him in place just as they had Sans. It

hadn't been long enough to actually restrain him from moving, but it threw him badly off balance, forcing Papyrus to spend precious seconds correcting himself to avoid collapsing in an ungainly heap on the ground. The ground was clearly a very unsafe place to be right now.

Those precious seconds cost them both dearly, as something came striking out of the darkness to catch him hard across the front, sending him slamming forcibly into a wall of the cavern.

And then Papyrus felt his soul turned blue instead, felt his own personal field of gravity invert and twist itself so that his soul now believed the wall to be the ground, so that he was quite effectively pinned. It was a mastery over that particular attack that only Sans himself had ever demonstrated.

Sure enough, when Papyrus' vision cleared, it was to see that Sans' left eye was flaring bright, and one arm was extended out towards him, bony fingers splayed - at least, he'd been forced and dragged that way by the roots and vines entwining him tightly. Maybe it was the impact talking, but Papyrus thought they almost seemed to be…wriggling.

"Your brother…he belongs to me, now."

Papyrus struggled and strained against the force keeping him pinned, but Sans had always, always been the stronger of the two of them and the creature that was using his body like a toy seemed to be just as strong. All he could think to do in that moment was call out again to Sans for help - his brother was still awake, still aware, he'd seen *it…*

…and then, this time, Sans answered. Several things happened in quick succession, and Papyrus missed most of them as his soul suddenly oriented itself properly, only to leave him collapsing in an ungainly heap on the ground anyway. When he looked up, Sans had stumbled several steps back. He stood hunched over and crouched, one hand pressed tightly to his head, the other unmistakably scrabbling to grab ahold of the vines extending out of his eye…

*"papyrus…run…*stop it! You know you can't beat me *please* **stop it!**"

Papyrus did run, but he ran once more towards his brother. Unfortunately, the conflict between Sans and the invader was making the cavern dangerous. The roots that had extended out of the ground were twitching and thrashing in apparent agitation, vines creeping all the more quickly over the rock, chunks being torn out of the walls as Sans' powers seemed to flare in every direction at once. The ground was trembling beneath his feet.

“run…” Now the noises Sans was making in his own voice sounded less like gasps of pain and more like sobs. Now the voice that wasn’t Sans’ sounded a little more like Sans’.

This was all familiar, this was all so familiar, but why, how…

Papyrus summoned bones up out of the ground to try and make some steady footing for himself, but Sans made them vanish out from under his feet, and Papyrus fell once more.

“If you don’t stop fighting, I’ll kill **everyone you’ve ever loved.** And I’ll use *you* do to it!”

Papyrus managed to make it up into a half crouch without being pitched over or pinned down again, but when he looked up desperately at Sans, he felt himself paralyzed anew by fresh horror.

Sans’ left eyesocket was no longer empty. Something was emerging from it - blooming. Golden petals blossomed.

“Won’t that just be peachy?”

And, as Sans shuddered and sobbed and whimpered helplessly, Papyrus found himself looking into the cheerily smiling face of a familiar golden flower.

It winked back at him, and either Sans or Flowey swiped a hand through the air, sending Papyrus tumbling back towards the mouth of the cavern with a yelp of pain before he could have possibly thought of defending himself. He knew the attack had come from Sans when it tried to push him further - this time, Papyrus was able to push back, and at least stand firm to look back at his brother through the swirling clouds of dust and leaves that filled the cavern, to look back and plead as he couldn’t remember having ever done before.

“SANS, I WON’T LEAVE HERE YOU LIKE THIS! I…I CAN’T…!”

“papyrus, i can’t fight it off forever!” It was the most Sans had said at once since this had begun, and it clearly cost him dearly. Flowey took the momentary lapse in Sans’ focus to press his own influence. For a moment, both the face of his flower and the face of his brother wore identical looks of pain and gritted effort.

“he’s going to use me to kill you, please get out of here, please, please *…”*

Papyrus heard something crack *inside Sans. Maybe it was something in his*

body. Maybe it was something in his soul. Sans arched back for a moment as though his spine were about to snap…and then he let out a soft, airless little sigh, and slumped forward instead.

Then Flowey laughed, and Sans had no choice but to laugh with him. "*hehe*heeheeheee**heehee**. My, my. You held out to the last, just to warn your brother."

Sans' body lifted its head. Flowey had retreated back into the depths of Sans' skull, but Papyrus held no delusions that it was Sans who was smiling at him much, much too broadly. The tiny golden flower winked at him with his brother's eyes, as though they were sharing a private joke at Sans' expense.

"That's so cute…"

"SANS…!" Most people didn't realize that skeletons could cry. Sometimes, even Papyrus forgot that they could. Their lives…his life…held so little cause for it. But now his vision was blurred with them, his cheekbones were warm with them, because there was no denying even to himself that he didn't know what to do. Sans was his brother, Sans was tired and fragile and sad and Papyrus was supposed to be the hero who kept him safe *. Yet all he could do was stand here and watch Sans in pain, obviously being torn apart from the inside out, but how could he save Sans without hurting him, too?*

Was that really the only way?

And then the light in Sans' left eye flickered one last time, a dull and smoldering ember, and Papyrus knew it wasn't the only way even before Sans caught his breath to speak, gritting out the words in his own voice.

"if you don't run now, he'll get you, too. **I will.** I t's no joke. *"*

A rustling along the ground alerted Papyrus just in time that Flowey had been sending creepers inching towards him in an attempt to do just that. Far more brutally than he'd ever wanted to believe himself capable of, Papyrus cleared them aside with two swipes of summoned bones. More moved in almost immediately to take the place of their destroyed brethren. It was a token gesture that saved him, but did nothing to save Sans.

"…I'LL BE BACK FOR YOU," Papyrus heard himself say. He knew in the space between his ribs that they were the right words to say, maybe the only words to say, but he didn't want to believe that he was saying them.

Before his resolve could falter any further, before he made the mistake of looking at his brother and being deceived once again into believing that his brother would truly be looking back as anything but a prisoner, Papyrus turned and ran. He ran down the passage until his hearing told him that he'd gained enough distance on the vines pursuing him even now.

Only then did Papyrus whirl back around. His right eye flared bright, and he clapped his hands forcibly together, one on top of the other. The effort left him dizzy, but the very bones of the earth and mountain responded, slamming *down from the ceiling and up through the floor to meet in the middle and block the passageway behind him, so tightly that not a breath could pass through.*

Something tried anyway, scant seconds later. Something hit the barrier hard enough to send flakes of calcium tumbling to the floor. Something scrabbled at the wall in its way, and then whined: "papyrus, don't leave me!"

The plea was convincing enough to make Papyrus sob, but then he heard Sans respond to his captor. "stop it, i told him to go, i want him to, no, I don't…"

He could have turned and run, in that moment. Maybe he should have. Instead, Papyrus crept back to the wall of bone, pressed his hands against it, pressed his forehead against it. It was the closest he could come now to his brother. Like this, he could still hear Sans' voice through the wall. Papyrus wanted so much to believe that it was only Flowey saying those words. He wasn't sure he could.

"It *hurts*, *Papyrus*, help me, *please*, you're my brother, you're not supposed to *leave me* alone to hurt, *run*…"

"I'LL COME BACK FOR YOU," Papyrus repeated, for the benefit of them both. The voice on the other side fell abruptly silent. "CONSIDER THAT A PROMISE, FROM THE GREAT PAPYRUS." He tried to dash the tears from his eyesockets - there was too much to be done, now. There was too much at stake. "CONSIDER THAT A PROMISE…FROM YOUR BROTHER."

Then he did turn, and then he did run, and the sound of fingerbones scrabbling and scratching at the walls haunted him long after he passed out of earshot.

Sans…I left him alone. I left him behind. I abandoned him, I shouldn't have left him behind, *Papyrus thought to himself, as he stumbled down the longest hallway in the ruins. The mad energy that had first fueled his*

flight was draining out of him rapidly, leaving him unsteady on his feet, his vision blurred with shock and tears. One more step, and his resolve nearly broke. He nearly went back.

Another step, and Papyrus built his resolve even higher.

But he knows why I did.

I'm his brother. I have to protect him.

And maybe, to do that, I have to leave him behind. *At least he was somewhere secure. At least, if he held Sans in one place, the bit of his brother that was still his brother would know that Papyrus meant to come back for him. No, not just meant to come back* - would *come back.*

To start with, there were still monsters living in the Ruins, even now. It was famliiar to them, and it was safe. Or it had been, until now. He would have to find them, he would have to gather them up, he would have to help them leave. Just in case. Sans shouldn't be able to get past that wall, but…just in case.

Sans wouldn't want to hurt anyone, after all. Sans never wanted to hurt anyone.

Papyrus could spare him that pain, at least, while he found people who might know how to spare him the rest.

* * *

"Look, Sans, he's gone! Just like you wanted!"

From a stalk extending from one of Sans' eyesockets, Flowey was able to turn and regard his new body with a bright, happy smile where it was slumped against the wall of bone. Sans smiled back at him. He didn't have a choice.

"With no one around, you don't have to worry about hurting anyone, right? Because if there's no one here, there's no one to like you, and there's no one for you to let down! And soon, you won't have to worry about letting anyone down ever again, because there'll be no more you! I saved you, Sans."

Slowly, carefully, he eased himself back through Sans' eye.

"We'll be together forever, Sans."

He stood up, and looked down at hands that weren't his hands…yet.

But they would do, for now.

“Just you…”

“just you…”

“And…”

“and…”

“Me.”

Step By Step

Chapter Notes

> Many thanks to my lovely beta, ynfernalis, for making sure that this chapter was in readable shape.

That had been a while ago. Papyrus would later learn that it had been nearly two days, since he'd first found his brother in that distant cavern within the ruins, and found himself tangled in this twisted chase. It had felt so much longer. It should have been so much shorter, of course - it didn't take two days to go from the ruins to halfway through Hotland under normal circumstances. But Flowey had been digging for victims that Papyrus had warned to hide, and Papyrus had been careful not to get too far ahead so that Flowey would still have someone to chase when he got bored of hunting. That, and of course even the boat person hadn't hung around once he'd told them what was happening.

So now here they were, and it would all come down to who was more determined. Or perhaps it would come down to who wanted to spite the other more. If Flowey held on long enough to kill Sans, too, then he would surely die as well. But maybe that would satisfy him, after having come this far.

Papyrus watched without blinking, listened without flinching as his brother screamed out in pain, and prayed even if he didn't know the word. He prayed so hard that his soul ached with the effort, for Sans to fight on just a little bit longer.

After an eternity and an instant, several things happened in very quick succession.

A blackened, smoldering husk of a *thing* tumbled from Sans' eye, onto the adjacent green tile. An alarm chime sounded, and it immediately started to crawl for a blue tile. The piranhas rose to give it trouble. It let out a hiss that sent them back down into the water, before it tumbled in after them.

At the same moment, Sans, scorched and smoking, started to fall. Papyrus started to race towards him. Undyne held him back, muscles straining with the effort as he fought thoughtlessly against her. But she was stronger, even now. She always had been. "Alphys, cut the power!" she called.

The flames vanished, Sans landed heavily on his knees, and Papyrus saw his brother staring blindly straight ahead with his sockets empty of eyelights, but a blue flame nevertheless burning brighter and brighter in the left one. Sans trembled and twitched like a toy that was at last running out of batteries, but rather than slowing down, Papyrus felt his brother's magic bubbling forth, hotter and brighter and hungrier by the second.

And then he felt his own soul turned green, and reflexively raised the shield that came with that. He did so just in time, as in the next instant, Sans' magic *exploded* outwards in a torrential wave of sound and light that left dust floating down from the distant ceiling.

Vision was slow to return, as was hearing. But as Papyrus blinked the world back into focus, the first thing he saw was Sans, collapsed and motionless in a heap on a powered-down grey tile. With a broken little cry in a voice he wouldn't have recognized in his own, had he been in his right mind to hear it, Papyrus tried to run towards his brother. This time, Undyne didn't stop him. This time, she ran with him.

"SANS!" Papyrus cried, falling to his knees beside his brother, moving immediately to gather him up safely into his own arms. *Safe, I can keep him safe again,* his mind was chattering, as broken bits of root and leaf fell from Sans' body. But as he took in more and more details, even Papyrus felt himself growing less and less certain of what had always been a truth in their lives.

There were holes scorched in Sans' shirt, burnt edges eaten away at the sleeves and hem of his coat, but that had clearly been the preferable outcome. The worst of it was where Sans hadn't had his thick winter clothes to protect him - his hands were so badly scorched that Papyrus was terrified for a moment that even moving his brother would cause them to collapse into ash, his face was so blackened in places that it was a miracle that he could still see, *if* he could still see. Even his lower ribs were marked, where the hot air had eaten away more quickly at the bottom of his shirt.

And he wasn't moving. He wasn't turning to dust but he *wasn't moving*, he wasn't being Sans after Papyrus had worked so hard and worried so much. What if he'd been too late, what if he'd saved Sans' body but Flowey had ruined his soul...

"SANS, W-WHAT'S WRONG? DON'T BE SILLY, IT'S ALL RIGHT NOW, Y-YOU CAN WAKE UP..." His fingerbones trembled with the effort of resisting the urge to shake the smaller skeleton. His eyesockets burned

with the threat of tears, his soul ached with a growing weight of despair. "LAZYBONES...SH-SHOW SOME BACKBONE! NYEH-HEH-HOO..."

He felt a hand placed on the top of his skull, and looked up to see Undyne looking down at the two of them. His friend looked down at him, her expression calm, but in her eye Papyrus knew he saw sympathy.

"Don't freak out just yet, okay?" she said quietly, looking back up the path in the direction they'd been running. "A lot of monsters would be out cold after something like that. I mean, not me, obviously, but a lot of monsters. Alphys will take a look at him, and she'll get him fixed because she's all smart and stuff, and...it'll be okay, Papyrus. You know that."

Right. He knew that. His brother wouldn't leave him, his brother would never leave him alone. He was just being silly, he was just being lazy, but maybe that was okay just this once after he'd worked so hard. Papyrus would forgive him.

And so he nodded in resolute determination, scrubbing fiercely at the threat of tears in his eyesockets, and then gathered Sans more carefully in his arms. He got to his feet, and followed Undyne back across the deactivated puzzle towards Alphys, and help.

* * *

The walk back to Alphys' lab seemed to take an eternity, Papyrus feeling his soul growing more and more agitated by the moment from sheer helplessness. He wasn't used to feeling helpless. He didn't like it, but then, there was so little about any of this to like.

Healing Sans' body should have been a straightforward affair, of course. Once he ate something, that might help set him right. There was no one who understood a monster's soul better than Alphys, however, and so no one was better prepared to examine what damage Flowey's invasion might have inflicted.

More to the point, between the three of them, there was no one better suited to the delicate work of examining Sans for any signs of stray roots or vines buried deep in his ribcage or down in his skull that might indicate that Flowey hadn't entirely released his grip.

Once they got Sans back to the lab, Alphys went through the physical examination first. It left her satisfied that Sans' body was free of any

further invaders, though with an equally grim assessment of the physical state of his body. Two of his ribs were badly broken, to the point that it was only Sans' own instinctive magic that was holding them in one piece, now that Flowey's vines weren't doing it for him. There were cracks around his right eyesocket and along several of his vertebrae, along with pockmarks. One shoulder was dislocated, and one hand had three of its fingers fractured and two of the inner bones badly broken. There was an actual chip taken out of his upper radius. All of this on top of the burns.

Undyne, thankfully, had plenty of experience wrapping and setting broken bones, and this she did with a grim resolve while Alphys prepared the next phase. She insisted all the while that this could be recovered from. This could be healed, just so long as they took care of his soul. Her voice, however, sounded somewhat hollow.

Next she hooked him up to some machines that Papyrus didn't understand. Even so, at the sight of her nodding in understanding at whatever readouts she was receiving on her handheld screen, he nevertheless felt himself relax for the first time in two days.

"HP levels are holding steady at one twentieth of a point. W-Wow...we were really lucky."

"LUCK HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WAS HARDLY GOING TO ALLOW SUCH AN IGNOBLE FATE TO TAKE HOLD OF MY BROTHER!"

"Still...I'm, I'm r-really sorry, Papyrus. I thought I refined the process so that it shouldn't harm his soul, but...I guess I messed up again..."

"It wasn't you, Alphys," Undyne spoke up, from where she was leaning against the wall and watching them both hover over Sans. "If I'm understanding what happened right, he probably had those injuries way before he followed us this far."

"Wh-What do you mean, Undyne? I admit, I've never...I've never really come across a case like this before, so a lot of this is only guessing."

Whatever she meant, Undyne didn't get the chance to explain, because Sans gave a faint little twitch from his position on the floor that Papyrus nevertheless noticed immediately. "SANS!" he cried, kneeling down next to his brother, reaching out to give his shoulder a careful shake. "SANS, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

Even after Sans opened his eyes, his eyelights flickered like a

flashlight on its last dregs of battery. Even when the lights stabilized, they seemed dim, somehow. And even when Sans had regained even a few fragments of consciousness, the first thing he saw just so happened to be a wire trailing along his arm, from one of the electrodes Alphys had taped to his skull.

Having only regained a few fragments of consciousness, however, it soon became apparent that he didn't see the wire as a wire. Not with the way he sat up suddenly, sharply, and moved to rip it away from himself. It must have been adrenaline, more than anything, that let him do even that much with his burned fingerbones. So of course, in the next second, the pain of his physical injuries hit him as obviously as any spear-strike ever could, leaving Sans curling up in a ball with his face pressed against his legs and his hands tucked against his chest. The *noise* he made was one that made all their souls ache with sympathy.

But at least he didn't flinch away when Papyrus scooted over next to him and draped a protective arm over his brother's shaking shoulders. Sans even leaned into him a little, which was a move that Papyrus was more than happy to encourage.

"papyrus?" Sans' voice when he spoke was weak and faint, barely more than a whisper.

"YES?"

"is...is he gone...?"

"OF COURSE HE'S GONE, SANS! YOUR EXCELLENT FRIENDS AND YOUR VERY COOL BROTHER CHASED HIM AWAY AND GOT YOU BACK!"

"oh, yeah?" Sans lifted his head slowly, and it obviously took him a second for his gaze to focus on Alphys and Undyne. Once it had, he grinned - it was clearly an effort, the expression seeming weak and strained on his face, but one he made. "thanks. and, uh...sorry."

"SANS! WHY WOULD YOU BE SORRY? WHAT ELSE COULD WE HAVE POSSIBLY DONE FOR YOU? YOU'RE OUR EXCELLENT FRIEND AND VERY COOL BROTHER, TOO, AFTER ALL!" Fussily, Papyrus drew Sans back against his side a little more firmly. Sans was obviously content to be drawn, even if the very next thing he did was to curl back up into a protective huddle. "BUT ALL WE'RE DOING NOW IS SEEING WHAT WE CAN DO TO MAKE YOU BETTER! I'M..." Here Papyrus faltered, in that way he so rarely did because so many of

his friends worked hard to make sure he never had to. But in this moment, confronted with his brother as a trembling, shaking mess, confronted with the grim looks on the faces of his friends, even his soul couldn't help but be shaken.

"...I'M SORRY I COULDN'T DO MORE TO KEEP YOU FROM GETTING HURT. PLEASE FORGIVE ME, SANS. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO, I DIDN'T THINK WE HAD MUCH TIME..."

"you didn't."

Perhaps the words were offered as a reassurance. Somehow, at least to Undyne and Alphys, they weren't very reassuring. But Papyrus smiled, patting his brother carefully on the shoulder. "BUT WE HAVE TIME NOW! AND WE'RE JUST USING THAT TIME TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER."

"what's the verdict?"

Undyne and Alphys found themselves exchanging looks over the top of the brothers' heads. Something passed between them, unsaid and safer that way. Perhaps it was the signs of understanding in Undyne's eyes that drove Alphys on to be able to stammer: "W-Well, um, we already set your broken bones. Next is, is to apply treatment for your burns. I know they m-must hurt, but they, they seem to be pretty standard. They should heal up just fine, as long as you let your soul recover along with them."

"i'll keep that in mind."

"Your soul is, um, is really weak, Sans. My readings indicate that your HP levels are holding steady at one-twentieth of a point. I've never seen them go that low. I mean, the, the good news is that they *are* holding steady, so there doesn't seem to be any lasting damage. Just as long as you t-take care of yourself, your soul should recover just fine."

"i'll do my best."

"I'm sorry, Sans. None of us knows how to heal. Not, not with magic."

"i know. it's okay. it's not like you thought you'd need it, right? not like this..."

"...no. Not like this."

In the end, Alphys' hands were shaking too badly to properly apply

the healing salve. She left it to Papyrus. Everything about Papyrus should have made that the most disastrous possible choice, but in fact, he worked with a care that seemed to come so naturally as to require no thought whatsoever. He worked the salve into Sans' hands and along his face and over his ribs with his own long fingerbones, chattering all the while. Sans, meanwhile, said nothing at all, but none of them really expected him to. He offered his hands and his face and his ribs as required, not without a wince not and then. But whenever he did, Papyrus patted him gently on the shoulder or the back of his skull, and Sans seemed to settle.

"sorry. i know i'm a mess."

"SANS, HONESTLY! IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE ONE HIT POINT, I WOULD GIVE YOU SUCH A SWAT! I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOT YOU TALKING SUCH NONSENSE, BUT I SUSPECT IT'S STARVATION!" He let out a little huff, even as he dabbed the ointment around Sans' right eyesocket. Sans, meanwhile, offered a shaky grin.

"that's probably not helping, yeah."

"YOU ARE NOT A MESS. YOU WERE VERY BRAVE, AND OF COURSE, I KNOW BRAVE PEOPLE WHEN I SEE THEM. SO I AM GOING TO TAKE YOU HOME, AND LET YOU EAT ALL THE UNHEALTHY FOOD YOU WANT, AND IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY. JUST LIKE I PROMISED!"

"y-yeah. just like you promised, bro."

Alphys didn't like the note in his voice. It was just a little too familiar. She wanted to say something, but...she didn't know what she wanted to say. Not after everything Sans had just been through. Not just yet.

"I have some instant noodles here that might help. Of course, you're both welcome to them. But I think...I think the best thing might be to just, um, t-take him home."

"think i'll pass on the noodles, alphys. they're better dry, and, uh, that's still not saying much."

"Of course."

"SO THAT MEANS I CAN TAKE HIM HOME NOW, RIGHT?"

"Right. And in the meantime, I, I guess I should go and tell the queen that everything's okay."

"I'll go with you, Alphys," said Undyne, pushing herself away from the wall. "Just let me walk these two dummies to the boat."

Of course, then came the matter of getting Sans to stand upright. It quickly became apparent that it wasn't going to happen. In the end, after a few heart-stopping false starts, Papyrus solved the problem entirely by picking his brother up and settling him on his back. Sans grumbled something indistinct, and then buried his face in his brother's shoulder and was asleep within seconds. Papyrus smiled at his brother, nodded at Undyne, and the two of them waved back to Alphys as they walked towards the western door of the lab and back out into the Hotland heat. Alphys waved back, forcing herself to smile as she watched them go, and the second the door slid shut behind them she felt the expression sliding off her face like oil through water.

"Oh, Papyrus," she murmured. "I don't know if it's going to be that easy. I don't know if it *can* be."

She hoped that it would, though. Just this once, she hoped that it would. They both deserved it.

* * *

It was amazing how harsh and sharp the world could seem, after only a couple of days trapped behind your own eyes. Sans' first memories after the heat of the flames had vanished had been memories of *overload* - the stone beneath his knees was too hard, the air was too hot, the voices were too loud, his bones ached and ground together as he moved, his own voice sounded as loud as screaming inside his skull, he'd felt as though one false move must surely leave him collapsing into dust and *that was why he hadn't been allowed to use his own body...*

Senselessness had followed, blessedly. Papyrus had been there when he'd woken again, and that had helped, even if part of how it had helped was to give Sans a way to fall asleep, rather than pass out, with the promise of being taken home.

He drifted in and out of consciousness, after that. He heard Undyne's voice. He heard someone singing, "tra la la". He heard Papyrus talking. He heard water, felt movement, and knew that these things were good and safe. His body felt too heavy to move for more than a bit at a time, and so it was easy, too easy, to just let the world drift around him instead.

Anything to ignore the fact that his body no longer felt like his own. Sans couldn't have put words to the idea even if he'd wanted to, and he really, truly didn't.

Except when he properly woke next, it was once again to the feeling of his body being moved without any conscious input on his part. He could feel steps being taken, could hear the familiar crunch of snow under his shoes, could see the world drifting by around him. But he wasn't the one taking the steps, and they were out of the boat, so he had to be walking except he wasn't, someone else was...

"SANS?"

Papyrus. When did Papyrus get here? He could feel his brother's hand over his, and his own hand was clenching tight enough to hurt, clenched tight around the roots and vines that were smothering his soul...

"SANS!"

Dimly, Sans felt himself moved, and now he could feel his feet dangling over open air, cold air against his burns, sharp fingerbones around his shoulders. Eyelights, scant inches from his own. His brother's eyes, right there, *right there*, flickering in concern.

Sans looked back at him. It was almost as though bad memories were trying to gnaw away at what little soul he had left, like ants swarming a wounded bird. His vision had gone blue.

"SANS...LOOK AT ME. *PLEASE*. IT'S ME, RIGHT? IT'S YOUR BROTHER. YOU KNOW WHO I AM? YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?"

Snowdin. He was in Snowdin and Papyrus was here. And Sans was being held up. Off the ground. He could almost feel the gears in his head squealing with the effort of putting two and two together, of surfacing through the fog, but...Papyrus had been carrying him. Flowey wasn't back, Papyrus had just been carrying him, but that had still felt a little too similar.

"yeah..." He took a deep breath, more for the grounding feeling of cold air inside his skull than anything else, and nodded. "yeah." Papyrus still didn't look convinced, and so Sans stumbled on. "you're here, you're papyrus, we're in snowdin. we're, uh, we're heading home. right?"

"NOT QUITE. MUCH AS IT PAINS ME, I WAS GOING TO TAKE YOU

TO GRILLBY'S FIRST, BROTHER." Papyrus made to settle Sans onto his back once more. Surprise meant that his grip was far weaker than it might otherwise be when Sans struggled out of it, only to land hard in the snow. "SANS!" Papyrus knelt down next to him, visibly alarmed, and made to reach out for him once more. "WHAT IN THE WORLD...?"

"don't..." Sans' voice was tight and strange, as he tried to swallow back the pain of the impact on his injures. But he still managed to twist away from Papyrus' grip. "i want to walk."

"YOU...WHAT?"

"i don't want you to carry me. i want to walk."

"BUT...!"

He knew everything his brother was about to say. Sans could barely stand. Sans had just been hallucinating. If anyone so much as looked at him funny, Sans was liable to turn to dust on the spot.

Not to mention that Sans usually had less than no problem with Papyrus carrying him. Usually he had to work to convince and cajole him into it, most days. There were few places he liked better, being held in his brother's arms or on his back, knowing that whatever life held next, Papyrus would take care of it.

But now...

Now...

'Hee hee. You're empty inside. Just like me.'

Just one more thing among many that Flowey had twisted up and broken.

It was painfully slow going. Even Sans was aware of that. From the dock to Grillby's was maybe ten minutes of walking, most days, if he stopped to admire the icicles. Now, every step was agony, and despite his resolve, he only made it that far by clinging tightly to Papyrus' arm. Papyrus, meanwhile, moved with him with a patience that would have shamed the mountain itself.

Step, step, feeling the snow part and pushed aside beneath his shuffling feet. Step, step, and then he stepped wrong and slumped heavily to his knees.

"SANS!"

"'m all right. 'm...'m all right, bro. just..." He waved a hand helplessly. "just need to rest."

Papyrus sat down with him, wrapping an arm around Sans' shoulders and tugging him nearer. Sans was happy to be tugged, turning his face against his brother's ribcage. He found that he needed the extra moment to steady himself, before he lifted his gaze to see just how little distance he'd managed.

They were barely back onto the main road. Papyrus, at least, had gotten them past the Ice Wolf's house.

Sans wanted to cry.

Instead, he urged his brother to stand up first, stood up with him, took his arm once more, and carried on, step by aching step.

He was so focused on just shuffling one foot in front of the other that the voices seemed to wash around him, meaningless noise. It took several more laborious feet until Sans realized just what the voices meant. Papyrus had told people that there was something wrong with him - whatever he'd said, it had been enough to keep people away. There couldn't have been enough time since then for him to tell people that anything had changed. The people of Snowdin were seeing him now for the first time since being warned that he was dangerous, a threat, when perhaps they'd never even known why he was a threat in the first place. How could Papyrus have explained what had happened to him? How could Papyrus have explained *Flowey*?

Someone drew near enough to get a good look at the state of Sans. Someone gasped. Sans immediately went fumbling for the hood of his coat. He heard Papyrus raise his voice...but, after a moment, perhaps moved by the way Sans flinched nearer to him, Papyrus tugged the hood up and over Sans' head anyway.

"thanks," Sans mumbled, and felt Papyrus squeeze his hand in reply.

A few feet more, and he had to rest again. There was a buzzing in Sans' head, or maybe it wasn't a buzzing, maybe it was the way leaves rustled when they scraped against bone. The cold air of Snowdin felt biting against his burned bones, biting as teeth, biting as fire...

*Do you really think it'll be that easy? Do you really think I'll ever let you get away? You're my **puppet**, and you always will be.*

"STAY DETERMINED, SANS! JUST ANOTHER FEW STEPS, AND..."

When had they started moving again? Sans couldn't remember. He couldn't even feel himself moving, but he was still holding tight to Papyrus' arm, and so he knew he must be. Everything just felt...heavy, and numb.

He heard a knock at a door. He heard the door open.

He heard a voice.

"Oh, thank goodness."

Sans looked up, into the bright eyes and water-burned face of one of his closest friends.

Symmetrical Scars

Chapter Notes

> Well. Now that the mad dash of holiday travel is over, how about an update?
>
> Believe it or not, this wasn't even the chapter when I realized that this fic would ultimately be Sans/Grillby. No, not even when I built events around the flashback to "Where Everybody Knows Your Name". I can be uniquely dense, at times.

Somehow, Papyrus wound up carrying him again, though only as far as it took to get from inside to the bar. Sans didn't mind, in that moment. He was too busy being distracted by the familiar warmth of the restaurant - milder than the flames, milder than the snow - and the smells. More than the grease, he smelled the polish Grillby used for cleaning tables and the smoke from the kitchen. It was all familiar enough that even now, his soul ached with it. *Safe.* This place was safe, had always been safe.

Except, of course, for when Flowey had ruined that, too. He only had to take a proper look at Grillby, once he'd been settled onto a stool, to remember it all.

It shouldn't have been possible to burn a monster that was made entirely of fire. Water, however, could do so. The effect was strange. Grillby normally burned with quite a full flame of oranges and reds. Now half his face was a sputtering, sparking mess of pale white fire, and one of his eyes was the black of a dead coal. His hands were burning blue and white at the edges, leaving trails of smoke as he moved. Sans knew, with a cold certainty, that it was only his friend's long sleeves and full suit that had kept the rest of him from being left in a similar state.

He knew, because he rememberd throwing the pot.

Sans felt sick to his marrow. He wanted to go home. He didn't want to be here, he didn't want to remember this, he wasn't strong enough to face it.

He certainly didn't want to be sitting here on a stool with a mug of something in front of him that was leaving curls of steam in the air. Grillby had produced the drink so quickly that he could only have

already had a pot going. Otherwise, even he wasn't that good.

Which meant that Grillby had been waiting for him to get back. Sans had thrown a pot of water in his face, and Grillby had been waiting for him to get back.

The drink turned out to be hot chocolate. Papyrus was looking at him worriedly, and so Sans drank it. Almost immediately, warmth flooded his bones, and more than warmth. Feeling began to return to his exhausted, battered soul.

Awareness returned as well, which was less welcome. Slowly, Sans started to notice more than Papyrus and Grillby.

Dogamy and Dogaressa were at their usual table. He could hear them lavishing their usual endearments on one another. He could hear that their voices sounded a little strained. Even Lesser Dogs's snoring sounded a little less genuine. There were others in the restaurant, too, and Sans wondered if they knew what had happened and what had almost happened. He didn't ask.

"Sans?" asked Grillby gently, waving a sparking hand in front of Sans' face. *"Can I get you something to eat? Anything. It wouldn't be any trouble. You look as though you could use something."*

"sure," said Sans, far more calmly than he felt. His own voice sounded far away, his head felt stuffed with cotton. He was too tired to note anything else. Then again, that wasn't necessarily anything new. "i'll have the usual. you know...a garden salad and a glass of water."

Now the silence was loud enough to ring. It was an effort, but Sans at last managed to lift his gaze from where his hands were curled around his empty mug, to find Grillby staring fixedly back at him. He couldn't discern any expression on his friend's face, but just this once, Sans wasn't sure he needed to.

"hehehehe. sorry. that...that wasn't funny at all, was it?"

"No," said Grillby, quietly. *"It wasn't. But I forgive you."*

"i guess some fries would be good. it's...been a while, since i've eaten. thanks, grillby."

"Of course. I'll be back in a moment."

Grillby retreated to the kitchen. Sans folded his arms on the tabletop,

rested his forehead on his folded arms, and tried to block out the memories along with the rest of the world. It was the next best thing to sleep.

* * *

Clearing away Papyrus' last little trick had been some good exercise. At least, it had been for Flowey, giving him the chance to get a handle on his new body, no matter his new body's thoughts on the matter.

He'd been forced to use his own petals and vines to chip away at the wall of bone. It had taken a surprisingly long while as it had proven startlingly resilient to damage. It didn't help that Sans seemed to have taken some reassurance from the fact of Papyrus' escape, and had used that reassurance to bolster the inner reserves that Flowey was trying so hard to exhaust. It wasn't enough to let him take control of his body back, but it was enough to keep Flowey from playing with some of his really *cool powers.*

Flowey had figured out how to keep control without making too much of a spectacle of himself. Sans' body didn't offer many places to hide, bag of bones that it was. He could still keep himself buried beneath Sans' shirt and coat, tucked into his skull, and he could keep that skull bowed low to hide the place where Flowey couldn't help but be seen along the back of Sans' spine when his hood wasn't up.

Like this, no one should know that anything had changed about their dear smiley trashbag until too late. It wouldn't do to send Sans' friends screaming in terror before Flowey had the chance to kill them.

"So, Sans!" *he chirped, as they stood before the smoking, jagged hole in the wall of bones. He'd wanted to take the entire thing to pieces just to vent the sheer indignity of* Papyrus*, of all monsters, slowing him down. Unfortunately, it had done such a good job that the body and its pilot were tired, and Flowey had finally given up.* "With our newfound partnership, where do you want to go first?"

He knew that Sans was still aware enough to hear him, could still speak and reply if Flowey didn't actively prevent him from doing so. In the absence of anyone else to hear, Flowey didn't prevent him. Sans remained silent anyway.

Flowey peered out down the newly cleared path, frowning faintly. They'd taken long enough that Papyrus might actually have been able to warn the other monsters in the Ruins. Judging by how quiet Sans was, he probably trusted the same. Anyone who had been foolish enough to remain, he

would have to go hunting for. That sounded too much like work and not enough like fun.

"I know! How about your *old stomping grounds?*" *Even Papyrus couldn't have made it all the way to Snowdin already.*

To his delight, that did move Sans to speak. How exhausted and faint he sounded only made it better. "you…you can control my body all you want…but taking me to grillby's is…gonna be a mistake."

"Oh, I don't think so! In fact, all your friends will be really happy to see you, won't they?"

It was getting easier, he could feel it. Flexing himself to move an arm here or a leg here was getting easier. The body really was just like his, now. Sans simply hadn't gotten the message. Really, it was already missing so much that Flowey was almost doing him a favor.

He drove that point home by starting him walking down the tunnel, towards the rest of the Underground and all its vast potential.

"Especially when you **kill** them."

Sans tried to dig in his heels. Well, now he was just being contrary for the sake of it. Flowey barely even had to make the effort to ignore his efforts. "you'll have your work cut out for you…if grillby is paying attention."

Flowey scoffed. "That old hothead? I'm not worried about him."

"maybe you ought to be."

Hm. Having his old enemy at his mercy was fun, but Sans' apparent reluctance to appreciate the gravity of his situation was starting to get on Flowey's nerves. His stubborn insistence on having hope *was so* irritating*, like having the world's worst, most out-of-tune song stuck in your head. Flowey apparently needed a bigger reminder of who was in charge right now.*

"You know, I've got to say, I'm not really a fan of walking everywhere. Sure would be nice if there was a way to do it *quicker*, huh, Sans?"

Sans tried to clam up again. Flowey was having none of it. "Come on," *he cooed. Carefully, cautiously, he extended a tendril of his own power to probe the defenses Sans had erected around what was left of his soul. It felt to his senses very much like the wall of bones they'd just blasted through – poor little dead thing. Even now, he was taking inspiration from his idiot*

brother.

Flowey would break down this wall, too. He just had to find the right weakness. For now, he managed to find a crack, and dug into it mercilessly.

"Let me tap into your powers."

There was an embarrassingly short fight that resulted in nothing more than Sans wasting a little more of his soul. Like a tree in a storm, his will bowed to Flowey's, and he admitted aloud what they both knew to be true

"…i can't stop you."

"Hee hee! That's right," *Flowey agreed, savoring the truth of the words. There was still more to be done, but he thought he'd earned this much.* "You can't. Now…**jump.**"

Sans took a shaking step forward, and then another, and then another, and then he gave a little hop and a twist and Flowey felt the world bend around them so that…

…snow crunched beneath their shoes. The cold air was bitter and biting on their skull. Snowdin was around them, drowsing and sleepy at this hour, obviously unaware of the danger that had just manifested in their midst.

But the light in the window of the building directly ahead was as warm and bright as ever.

"Ooh, look! Here we are. Grillby's. Now…*play along, puppet."*

"you won't get away with this…" Oooh, Flowey could feel him shaking *inside, feel that little cage of his rattling with dread. Or maybe it was only anger. Strange as Sans was, maybe there was a part of him that even wanted it – some people were secretly freaks that way, in the dark depths of their skulls.*

And yet, poor little Sans. He sounded so tired, but rather than just take a nap, he continued to defy Flowey anyway.

What an idiot.

Good. Good. *Anything to draw him out of his box and draw him off of his guard so Flowey could draw more blood. With the opportunity right in front of him, he didn't hesitate an instant to twist the knife a little further, as he walked them up the path and to the door of the diner.* "Oh, Sans. I

already have. Heeheeheeheehee***hee***…"

Yet by the time the bell over the door chimed to announce their arrival, Sans' voice was entirely his own again, and there wasn't so much as a leaf to be seen about him.

"Dogamy, dear, look, it's Sans!"

"Oh, Dogaressa, you're the only one I can look at!"

The interior was fairly deserted, which was disappointing. Dogamy and Dogaressa were enjoying a romantic evening out. It might not have started as a romantic evening out before Lesser Dog fell asleep in his food, but they'd clearly decided to make the best of the situation. Someone was trying yet again to repair the jukebox, and of course there was Grillby, behind the bar and wiping down its already gleaming surface.

The room was warm, and smelled of smoke and grease and wood and polish. Flowey felt Sans squirming inside like a worm on the hook – even now, a part of him wanted so badly to feel safe *here, even when the rest of him knew that nowhere was safe now. A soul was such a silly thing. Flowey was glad he didn't have one anymore.*

Dogamy did at last tear his gaze away from his beloved's eyes to look at Sans instead. "But Sans, close the door, will you?"

"hm? oh, right, sorry." In the midst of sizing up the place, Flowey had forgotten to do that, and now a cold wind and a stray gust of snowflakes was blowing in behind him. Obligingly, he closed the door behind him. Snowdin was hardly a harsh environment, but the warm air was still very pleasant. Then, deciding to play a little, he asked, with a big, broad smile for the two dogs: "is that a little better, for the nose nuzzling champs?"

Dogaressa clapped her paws in delight, looking over at Dogamy with bright, doey eyes. "Oh, dear, he called us the champs!"

"Well, we are!" Dogamy gave a little laugh, leaning forward to nuzzle affectionately at his mate.

*And, they were off again. Safe behind Sans' eyes, Flowey made a expression of disgust, before look*ing towards the bar instead.

Ooh, feels like this body's hungry! Well, I guess I can take a quick break to fuel up. Gotta keep my strength up, after all.

But Sans was silent once more. In fact, he was so quiet that it was only a

faint pressure in the back of Flowey's awareness that told him that his enemy hadn't just suddenly decided to abandon the body after all. That was odd, and maybe a little worrying, but he was prevented from scratching any more at the walls in his way with Grillby's attention still very much on him. The bartender waited, head slightly tilted, his hand resting on the bartop with its rag where he'd paused in his work. Ugh. Could he even talk?

Flowey decided to risk it. "hey, grillby. long night?"

"Sans." *Grillby spoke in the voice like the heat haze over a campfire – soft and breathy on the surface, with a crackling warmth beneath.* "You don't usually come in at this time of night." *The flames around where his mouth might have been deepened to a shade of lighter blue for a moment – Flowey supposed that might have been Grillby's equivalent of a smile.* "It must be a particularly hard crossword puzzle."

"you could say that," Flowey agreed with a nod, hopping up onto a barstool.

"I see. So, then. How have you been?"

"oh, same old, same old. i can't complain, i guess."

"Can't complain?"

"nope. things are…turning up me." He chuckled a little. It was true, after all – it was just a matter of which "me". This was good. He needed the practice, pretending to be Sans, at least until he could convince Sans to stop being so greedy *with his memories…*

"I see," *Grillby agreed with a nod, as though Flowey's little private joke made perfect sense. And then:* "So. You'll be having the usual, yes?"

…for moments just like this one.

"uh, yeah?" Flowey said, and then he found that he couldn't think of anything else to say. Sans really needed to learn to share.

Grillby leaned across the bar towards him, and Flowey fancied that the bright holes of light that served as his eyes were a little wider now. "You… do remember what your order is, yes?"

"of course i remember! i'm just, um, t-testing your memory!"

It was the flimsiest and most transparent excuse in the book, which made it

all the more surprising when Grillby nodded, as though Sans tested his memory about his usual order all the time. He straightened up, tucking the rag into his apron, and replied in a businesslike tone: "Well, clearly you're going to have a garden salad and a glass of water."

Ooh, he felt *the way Sans sat up and took notice at that. Flowey could barely suppress his glee.* Hee hee! Bet you weren't counting on all your friends being this stupid, were you? *"yeah. yeah, of course i am, that sounds right!"*

"But Sans, I did want to speak to you privately, if that was okay. It's about your future here."

"my…future?"

"Yes. You do remember that you work here, right?" *Grillby prompted gently, his expression wavering not a twitch outside the flicker of flames. Wow, was Sans' memory really that bad? Maybe he wasn't deliberately blocking anything off at all.*

"of course i remembered that." Hopefully, that wasn't too suspicious to say. But Flowey could see an opportunity presenting itself, and was eager to pounce at long last on a target that might offer up a little less resistance than Papyrus had, inside and out. "i was hoping to talk to you about that, too."

"Good. Well, if you'd just step back into the kitchen for a moment…" *Grillby gestured at the door nestled in the lefthand corner of the room, between the edge of the bar and the wall. He opened a door on that side of the bar to let himself out as well.*

Flowey slid off his stool and went to follow.

"hehe. i'm right behind you."

And indeed, he was through the door and into the kitchen even before it had completely finished swinging shut behind Grillby. This made it all the more surprising to Flowey to realize that Grillby was no longer in front of him.

The door closed behind him.

The bolt slid home.

"Now that we are out of earshot, I would like to ask you what you have done to my friend Sans."

* * *

The change was immediate, though slight. At least, it was slight for anyone who didn't know Sans the way Grillby did. Besides, it wasn't as though he needed any more confirmation that something was wrong.

That didn't change the fact that it send a fresh wave of heat up his spine to see Sans' eyes narrow at him, see him smile *like that. It was a broad, sharp, cruel smile that twisted the skeleton's face in a way that Grillby could only think of as "unnatural".*

"hehehe…you saw right through me, did you, hothead? well, isn't that just peachy."

Sans' stance became something defensive, the sort of defensive that he knew could become hostile at the drop of a hat. Grillby refused to lower himself as far as responding in kind. Not to this thing. Not here.

"what are you gonna do? burn *me to death?* You'll have to get through your friend, too."

Fire always knew its favorite prey, and so Grillby was only faintly surprised to see what were unmistakably roots, vines, and creepers inching out from the edge of Sans' sleeve, under the bottom of his shirt, through his right eye. Whatever was in there was puffing itself up in an attempt to look bigger and stronger – perhaps from aggression, perhaps from fear.

Grillby hoped very much that it was fear.

It didn't even bother with Sans' voice, then. That was a kindness, really, and Grillby allowed himself a moment to be grateful for a little less unpleasantness, as he took a deliberate step forward.

Sans' body took a step back. Grillby went to delicately tug his cleaning gloves off, one finger at a time, and spoke in a tone that started out as measured and deliberate as a stovetop.

"I am well aware of what I would have to do to get to you through Sans." *He took another step forward, and his foe retreated. Another, and another, and Grillby set one glove down on the countertop.* "Bone is more resilient than you'd think." *He smiled thinly.* "But plant matter is another matter altogether."

"Are you *threatening* me?" *He couldn't tell if it sounded amused or appalled. It didn't matter.*

Grillby set the other glove down to join its twin. "You are inhabiting the body of one of my closest friends. Perhaps you ought not to ask *stupid questions.*"

"stupid questions, huh?"

Sans' gaze ticked to the right. Grillby followed the skeleton's line of sight before he could stop himself. By the time he realized what had happened, what he'd inadvertantly done in chasing his foe further into the kitchen, Sans was already moving.

"big talk, insulting someone who's standing next to the sink!"

It wasn't the biggest pot Grillby owned. But it had been soaking for a while, and so was very, very full of soapy dishwater.

Grillby tried to step back as the thing flung the lot at him, but most of it still hit him squarely. The water made his exposed flame sizzle and steam on contact, lighting up his entire body with searing pain that left him doubled over, cradling his smoking hands against his chest. He never left much flame exposed to the open air, and this was precisely why. Even something as simple as shorter sleeves, and the shock of that attack might have incapacitated him entirely, if not killed him outright

As it was, his hands were sputtering and sparking in strange colors, and Grillby didn't even want to think what his face must look like.

Three thoughts were the first to return as the world swam back into focus. The first thought was to chastise himself for letting the dishes go undone this long. The second thought was that if Dogamy and Dogaressa had heard him scream, he hoped they would only think a teakettle had gone off. Apparently, the two sounds were not dissimilar.

The third thought was to realize that the thing in Sans' body was laughing. Giggling, really.

"How does it feel, to know that Sans is the one who hurt you?"

"Sans isn't doing any of this!"

The shout echoed around the kitchen. As Grillby managed to lift his head, he genuinely thought he saw the expression of twisted glee on Sans' face falter.

He knew he saw a light flicker in Sans' left eye, like a dying firefly.

“that’s right. he isn’t. he isn’t doing anything. he certainly isn’t stopping me.”

Oh, my friend. Is that what it’s told you?

No.

No.

Grillby felt himself start to burn anew with rage at the very idea. He had to brace a hand on the countertop to do it, but he made himself stand straight and tall once more to confront his enemy.

“I don’t know who you are, but you won’t succeed. We are standing in my kitchen, and I. Am. *Fire.*”

The body-snatching thing clearly hadn’t been expecting this. It took a stumbling step back, turning Sans’ head a little in a clear search for options. In the end, its attention returned back to the sink, and it reached out for a half-submerged frying pan. “i splashed you once, hothead, and I can do it again. so maybe you should consider piping down?”

The invader found itself forced to pull back very quickly as Grillby lashed out a hand to slam *against the rim of the sink, leaning forward still further to close the distance between them. He put his face right up close to Sans’, so that perhaps the evil little plant buried in his skull could still feel the heat through the bone, could know that it wasn’t safe.*

"You have no idea what water does to a grease-fire, do you?” *Grillby smiled. It hurt like hells, for a start, but he’d learned long ago that there were many different kinds of fuel, and some burned much hotter than others. The body-snatcher seemed almost paralyzed beneath the light of his glowing eyes.* “Or maybe you have every idea, and you finally realize that *I am not bluffing.* I *will* destroy you *and* Sans, if you stay. But as far as I am concerned…” *He tried not to let his voice break. He failed.* “…my dear friend is already dead. It would be no loss.”

For a moment, he stared into two flickering pinpricks of light in the depths of Sans’ eyesockets.

Then they winked out, and something else stirred within Sans’ skull. He heard the unmistakable rustle of leaves against bone, and this close, thought he caught a glimpse of something golden.

“heh.” *It laughed, in both Sans’ and it’s own voice together. It smiled up at him, entirely unafraid.* “i can see why he likes you so much. don’t think

you've won just because i've decided to leave, though." *It tapped a fingerbone against Sans' skull, and winked up at him.* "wouldn't want it going to that hot head of yours'."

And that, at least, was so much a familiar expression on his old friend's face that Grillby felt the spark of anger in his heart sizzle and falter traitorously. As he looked into its eyes, the evil little plant looked back into his, and saw as much.

Brazen as anything, it ducked around him and moved towards the kitchen door. Grillby knew that he could end this right now. He knew that he, perhaps, should end this right now. Papyrus would understand, and even if he didn't, others would be safe.

In the end, he couldn't do it, and the thing that had stolen his friend away knew it. Grillby listened to it lift the bolt back on the door, and then pause.

"i'm sure i'll be seeing you again, grillby. after all…i am your favorite customer."

Grillby flinched under the words, felt his shoulders slump under the weight of exhaustion and pain and his own weakness. "Just go." *He didn't look back. He was, for a moment, genuinely afraid of what he would see if he did, or perhaps what he might not see.*

He heard the door open.

"be seeing you, then."

He heard the door close.

He heard nothing more from the restaurant beyond, beyond the general background murmur of a slow night.

It hurt to move, but Grillby managed to limp slowly towards the back of the kitchen, where he kept the kindling oil for just such an emergency. And as he moved, he tried to keep the battered ember of hope alive in his heart. It was hard, when he felt as though he were standing beneath the shadow of a stormcloud.

"Oh, Sans…is this what Papyrus was calling to warn me about?"

* * *

do it come on i won't fight you i won't stop you papyrus isn't here to

see do it burn him burn me please stop this please *please…*

Sans was expecting and praying at every step to feel the heat of flames on their back. In turn, Flowey knew as soon as he laid his hand on the doorknob that they were in the clear.

Hee hee.

you know, you're not so great at this whole "killing everyone i love" thing so far. maybe we should stop by the library on the way out. they might have a book you can read.

He opened the door, glanced over his shoulder to wave at Dogamy and Dogaressa, and stepped back out into the snow. After the oppressive heat of the restaurant, the chill actually felt quite nice on his bones.

Tell me, Sans. Which do you think it is? Are all your friends as cowardly as you are…or do they really just not care about you that much, to leave you here with *me?*

Sans went silent once more, and this time, Flowey knew to take that as a victory.

* * *

"Papyrus? May I speak with you, for a moment?"

Sans was chewing on the fries as though they were made of cardboard, with determination rather than enjoyment, and Papyrus was worried. He was so wrapped up in his own worry that he flinched to hear himself addressed, before looking up to find Grillby looking back at him.

"YOU ABSOLUTELY MAY," Papyrus answered, with barely a moment's hesitation.

Grillby's gaze flickered to Sans, and then back to him. *"Privately?"*

"OH."

That was less absolutely okay, and the only thing that kept Papyrus from refusing outright was curiosity and concern, about what Grillby might feel he could say to his friend's brother that he couldn't say to his friend.

"i'll be okay," Sans said, without looking up. He was holding a fry between thumb and forefingerbone, examining it with a

thoughtfulness and a hesitation that Sans never previously displayed around Grillby's food. "i'm not goin' anywhere, bro."

"WELL...I SUPPOSE IF YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY SURE..."

Sans was, and so Papyrus got up off his stool, and followed Grillby back into the kitchen.

"ARE YOU FEELING ANY BETTER, GRILLBY?" Papyrus asked, once the door had shut behind them. Just as he had called to warn Grillby that Sans wasn't right, Grillby had called later to warn Papyrus that Sans had passed through. In doing so, he'd told Papyrus what had happened. That had ultimately led to the plan that had saved Sans, but in the meantime, Papyrus couldn't help but discover what else had happened, to cause Grillby's smoking, sparking state.

Surely, the cook didn't blame his brother for that, did he?

Papyrus, I know you've never been particularly fond of my cooking."

That was an unexpected enough direction in the conversation to leave Papyrus speechless for a long moment. He thought he saw Grillby smile, before carrying on in a tone that was rather more gentle: *"And for what it's worth, one chef to another, I respect that. But please, I must ask you a favor."*

"ANYTHING, GRILLBY!" He could certainly offer that much, in exchange for the fire monster's help.

"Let me take care of feeding Sans for a while. Of feeding you both, if you'll allow it. Please. I'm sure you've noticed that he seems...less than enthused, at the prospect of eating at all. I won't pretend to guess why. But going through what he has, suffering the sort of damage he obviously has, what's important is that he eat. And going through what you have, what's important is that you focus all your considerable energies on taking care of Sans, as well as yourself. Let me worry about food. You both just worry about getting better."

"THAT'S VERY GENEROUS OF YOU, GRILLBY, BUT..." And here Papyrus couldn't help but falter, confused. "I DON'T UNDERSTAND. WHAT DO I HAVE TO GET BETTER FROM?"

"You've done well, to get your brother back, Papyrus. But I don't doubt that it was a trying time for you as well. If nothing else, you'll need to keep your strength up, so you can better be there for Sans."

"THAT, I CAN DO! BUT, GRILLBY...IF HE ISN'T EATING YOUR FOOD NOW, HOW WILL THINGS GET ANY BETTER LATER?"

Grillby's fire actually seemed to burn a little lower, at that. He folded his arms across his chest, looking away. *"I don't know that it will. I only know that if he has the best chance of responding to anyone's food, it's mine. I don't mean to sound arrogant, but you know how often he eats here."*

Papyrus did know.

"And...I want to help. I couldn't do anything for him, before, but this is something I can do. Something I know that I'm good at."

"OH, DON'T BE SILLY! YOU'VE ALREADY DONE SO MUCH TO HELP!"

Grillby smiled, and yet Papyrus had never seen him look so sad.

"You're very kind to say so, Papyrus."

He said nothing more. He just set to work grilling up a couple of burgers and a fresh order of fries for home. Papyrus lingered in the doorway for a moment, watching him, knowing that there was something he should say. But he couldn't think of what it was, and didn't want to keep Sans waiting.

Grillby didn't re-emerge from the kitchen until they were about to leave.

Tough Love

Chapter Notes

> Fun fact! This chapter is the last chapter containing any material that was previously posted on tumblr. So everyone is carrying on blind from here. Good luck.

The food tasted like ashes and sawdust, but Sans ate it, because he knew he should. He knew he was supposed to like it. At the least, it boosted his HP back to normal levels, and made the walk home a little less agonizing. When they left, Grillby passed a bulging doggy bag over to Papyrus. Sans smiled at the sight of it, but only because he knew he should. He made no mention of the fact that Grillby had clearly been avoiding him once he'd assured himself that Sans wasn't about to fall to pieces there on the floor. He made no mention of the way Grillby flinched when he looked at Sans, before he said goodbye. Sans supposed that he didn't have to.

He wasn't feeling much of anything, not even enough to be worried about that. Of course, it often felt as though Sans went through his days in a similar state, so maybe that was as it should be. At least the pain from his injuries was less. Papyrus also had more of the salve from Alphys, to reapply on his burns later.

But all of that was for later. When they finally, finally opened the front door and stepped inside, Papyrus barely had time to ask if Sans wanted to rest for a while before Sans was shuffling over to the couch. He tugged his usual blanket out from under the couch cushions, curled on his usual half of the couch, and tried to lay down in a way that didn't put painful amounts of pressure on his burned or broken bones. Papyrus sat down as well, and Sans heard him turn on the television.

Eventually, Sans settled on his side, with a pillow beneath his ribcage and spine. He wasn't sure if what happened next could be called sleep. It was dreamless, which was a blessing, and deep in the sense that Sans never remembered sleeping. He only remembered waking, as though hours were passing in a blink, as though he were slipping and falling through a reset once more.

But the human wasn't coming back.

For a while, he only woke up for a few minutes at a time. Papyrus was always there, and the television was always on, though it was a

different show every time. Mostly, his brother was worryingly quiet. Mostly, Sans woke up to feel Papyrus looking at him. Once, he woke up to overhear Papyrus on the phone, but he couldn't tell to who.

Until at last he woke up to hear Papyrus snoring, and the television was just showing a test pattern. That was different enough from all the other times he'd woken up so far to keep Sans awake. It almost wasn't - for a moment, he could feel himself wavering on the edge of senselessness, knowing in his bones that all it would take to sleep again would be to close his eyes. Perhaps it was that same realization that finally finished rousing him. Thoughts like that could be especially dangerous, for monsters, and there had been times when he'd accidentally strayed too close to that path before.

But of course, that left Sans to face reality once more, albeit just the little bubble of it he'd been safely closed back into. That didn't make things any more pleasant, of course. For a start, Sans slowly realized that he felt *disgusting*. He was suddenly, piercingly aware of the fact that he'd been wearing the same clothes for well over two days, at this point, that he'd run from Snowdin to the Ruins, back to Snowdin and through Waterfall and halfway across Hotland. He smelled like a wet log and a ruined campfire at the same time. It felt like there was physical grit between his bones.

Normally, that might not have made a difference. Sans was hardly fastidious at the best of times. His coat got washed once every couple of weeks, if that, and only at Papyrus' insistence. But in that moment, that strange timeless moment where the television was silent and Papyrus was sleeping, it was suddenly one thing too many.

Shaking his head in a vain attempt to clear it, Sans pushed himself laboriously up and off the couch, and headed for the bathroom to clean up. A shower, maybe, or a bath. He could do that much for himself. Everyone had been working themselves so hard to try and piece him back together, surely he could at least do that much for himself.

Sans stepped inside the bathroom, flicked on the lights, and closed the door.

Then he looked up, and in doing so caught sight of himself in the mirror. All of Sans' resolve flew out of his mind like a startled bird.

After all, it was the first time Sans had seen himself in…days, really. Even before Flowey. He wasn’t exactly a terribly vain monster at the

best of times.

But here and now, looking in the mirror, even he felt shaken down to the soul at the sight of what a *mess* he was. Unconsciously, he found himself fumbling for his hood, wanting nothing more than to pull it up and over his ruined face. All he managed in doing so was to catch another look at his charred fingerbones. The sight made him flinch with surprise before he remembered himself. Even his hands no longer looked like they belonged to him, anymore.

For a while, they hadn't.

He looked like a shadow, a nightmare, a *demon*. There were cracks around his right eyesocket where Flowey had dug in especially hard, blackened rings around his eyesockets and his teeth. When he opened his mouth, Sans saw that even the inside of his jaw hadn't entirely escaped the heat.

Beyond that, the bone looked brown and dirty and dead. Those scant inches of skull that remained mostly white and undamaged by some demented stroke of luck almost seemed to be a mockery, more than anything, a reminder of what he'd been before Flowey had ruined him.

Alphys had given him medicine, of course, for body and soul. Something that might clean him up, in time. The *might* seemed particularly damning, in that moment. For everything Sans had endured through the resets, for all the danger he'd faced as a monster with one hit point, one thing he'd always been able to escape in the end was lasting consequences. Whoever died would eventually come back, even if only for a while before they died again. Whatever damage was done would be undone as though it had never happened, because it wouldn't have. Whatever he said or did would ultimately be forgotten.

But the human wasn't coming back, not even Flowey could reset anymore, and *this wasn't going away*. Sans felt himself suddenly faced with the idea of a future where he would have to carry these *marks* of his own weakness forever and slumped to his knees beneath the weight of it.

He'd always been pathetic, of course. He'd been apart and strange and *wrong* for as long as he could remember anymore. But it had always been a source of perverse pride that at least he was good at hiding that fact from everyone around him. No more of that. No escape.

You're empty inside, just like me.

We'll be together forever, Sans.

The mirror *cracked*, the sound sharp and loud enough to make Sans flinch, reminding him too much of breaking bones. He was brought back to reality to the sight of his own face in the broken glass, twisted and distorted even further. There was still enough clarity to see that his left eye was flickering rapidly between blue and gold, too bright. A couple of small bones had appeared behind him, ramrod straight in the air, vibrating with his own pent up tension. He noted these things as he might a threat posed by a stranger. He was a stranger. He was a threat. A skeleton was always smiling, of course, but in the broken glass, his smile looked a little too wide, a little too sharp, a little too much like…

So Sans hit the mirror again. And again and again and again and again until he was beating cracks in the wall behind it with bones, and there were tears on his cheeks and he was sobbing so hard that his soul hurt and the world was too much after being trapped behind his own eyes. He couldn't keep himself from flinching every time he felt a stray brush of air through his eyesockets because maybe it was just air and maybe it was a petal or a leaf. Just because he was *free* didn't mean he was *safe*, it could happen again, it would happen again…

When Papyrus kicked the bathroom door open, it was to find Sans kneeling there on the floor, amidst shards of broken glass and plaster dust, trying with an almost feral strength to dig his fingers into his right eyesocket and deep inside his skull.

"SANS, W-WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

Papyrus was taller, and stronger, and had been for most of their lives. So it was a simple thing for him to grab hold of Sans' hands with both of his and pull them away from his skull and, when Sans tried to twist away from him, to hook one of his legs around his brother's middle and pull him against Papyrus' ribcage for support.

"STOP IT! YOUR SKULL IS STILL A MESS! IF YOU KEEP PULLING LIKE THAT, YOU'LL BREAK SOMETHING!"

"Good."

Sans could have turned Papyrus' soul blue and flung him back out the bathroom door. Papyrus could have turned Sans' soul blue and pinned him to the floor. Neither of them did that. Sans just struggled until his

bones burned with the effort, and it was a good pain, because even if it was a futile effort it was one that he could at least still move to make. Bit by bit, too slowly for Sans to notice that it was happening until it already had, Papyrus' grip became less of a hold and more of a hug. And even when he did notice, Sans simply moved to return it, because he couldn't not and at least he was free now to do that, too.

So the end result was Papyrus sitting there on the floor, his back against the wall, his arms around Sans. The end result was Sans, exhausted anew to the point of being collapsed limply against Papyrus, his ruined face pressed against his brother's ribcage, his burned hand cradled safely between them. Papyrus' skull pressed against his, his mouth against the top of Sans' head, so that the wordless noises of reassurance he made vibrated through Sans' skull and down his spine, leaving him certain that nothing else was in him to hear. Sans, meanwhile, was too exhausted to do much more than whimper and shudder with the aftermath of too much emotion, and so couldn't help but hear him.

* * *

In the end, Papyrus got him into a bath and helped Sans scrub away what could be scrubbed. He reapplied the salve to his burns, changed the bandages over his breaks. He bundled all of Sans' clothes into a ball to be washed, and left Sans one of his old shirts to wear. Sans felt very small in doing so, and also a good deal safer.

In the end, there was no question about Sans sleeping in his room for now, and so they both retired back to the couch for a little while longer.

Sans awoke after less than half an hour, in a freshly agitated state, and Papyrus could only watch in apparently genuine bewilderment as Sans stumbled up the stairs to Papyrus' room. By the time he managed to rouse himself to go and help, Sans had already disappeared inside, and was fumbling around on Papyrus' bookshelf.

Then Papyrus understood, and went to pull out *Peek-A-Boo with Fluffy Bunny* from where Sans had last left it. The smile they shared as Papyrus passed the book over left both their souls feeling lighter. They still read it on the couch, Papyrus sitting on his side, Sans sitting up on his. Sans' voice wasn't quite up to its usual snuff. He still did his best, and Papyrus heard him, and it was one familiar point to rebuild their lives back on. It was something, and in the end, they both slept a little easier for a little while longer.

Unfortunately, just because they got their house back in order didn't mean the rest of the world was so accommodating.

Sans mostly stayed inside from then on, either in the living room or in his workshop behind the house. He still slept a great deal, and part of the reason he slept a great deal was because he soon realized that Papyrus only felt safe to go out and about when Sans was asleep. If he woke up while Papyrus was out, Sans watched television, or else straightened up the place just enough to keep his brother from going crazy. He never picked up the sock, though. Some things were just a matter of principle. Occasionally, when he got dizzy, Sans would force himself to pick at some food.

For the next few nights, Papyrus insisted that they go to Grillby's. That made for a fascinatingly disturbed change of pace, and Sans went along just to make his brother happy. They usually went later than Papyrus would have liked and earlier than Sans would have liked. Such was the nature of compromise.

Sans didn't like it ouside. It was too big, too open, too many opportunities to find onesself alone and at risk, even with a brother like Papyrus. Sans especially didn't like being stared at, and while the people of Snowdin were generally friendly to a fault, Sans currently made a sight that he knew no one could help but stare at, as the result of a tale that he soon realized no one properly knew.

"why don't you tell 'em what happened?" he asked Papyrus one night, while they were walking home.

"IT SHOULD BE YOUR STORY TO TELL. AND NOT JUST BECAUSE I WASN'T THERE FOR MOST OF IT. WHICH MEANS SOME PARTS OF IT STILL CONFUSE ME. SO IF YOU DON'T WANT TO, I DON'T WANT TO!"

That, it seemed, was that. He could tell that Papyrus wished that Sans *would* talk more about what had happened, what had caused it, but Sans just...couldn't. No matter how much Papyrus ran himself ragged trying to take care of his brother, Sans was still too tired, still too weak. Then again, that was nothing new.

Maybe he was overreacting to everyone and everything, after being denied the chance to visibly react to anything. Maybe he was only channeling his talents for avoidance in new and exciting directions

Sans doubted it, however. After all, how could he be expected to believe that everyone else was okay with him when the closest thing

Sans had to a best friend could still barely stand to be out in the restaurant with him? Somehow, Grillby always had a lot of food to cook up for the morning when the two of them came in for the evening. Sans knew he should ask, but somehow, he never did. Maybe he was just too afraid of the answer.

So life returned to something functional, something that was at least under Sans' control. He enjoyed that much, and perhaps the metaphorical heart of the matter was that he was afraid to risk more.

Papyrus, however, was never one to be satisfied with "functional", which was something Sans knew well about his brother. Progress was what mattered. *Hope* was what mattered. So he wasn't really even that surprised when, one morning a few days later, Papyrus proposed a trip to Waterfall with the sort of pleading look in his eyes that Sans found impossible to deny. He had no idea what the purpose of the proposed trip was, if there was any, but he wasn't surprised that his brother had finally decided on a plan. And, because it made his brother happy and sometimes it felt as though that was the only thing that made Sans happy anymore, he agreed to the trip.

He probably shouldn't have been surprised at who was waiting for them where the boat let them off, but Sans still felt just that as he looked up at Undyne.

"Hey, losers," the former captain said, grinning broadly at the two of them. Her arms were folded across her chest, and her eye seemed to gleam as brightly as her teeth. "I was starting to think you were gonna wuss out on me."

"NEVER! WE ARE THE LEAST WUSSY SKELETONS YOU WILL EVER MEET! AND NOT JUST BECAUSE WE'RE THE ONLY SKELETONS YOU'VE EVER MET!"

"Well, uh, we'll see about that." Sans flinched with surprise as Undyne suddenly draped an arm heavily around his shoulders. It somehow felt more like a threat than a reassurance. "All righty, Papyrus, we'll see you back at the house!"

"what."

"WELL, IF YOU'RE SURE..."

"Sure as anything. C'mon, you trust me, right?"

In this, Papyrus looked a good deal more certain in answering. "OF

COURSE I DO!"

"Then that's that. Shoo."

Papyrus knelt down to hug Sans, and despite Sans' reluctance to pull away, he then shooed, leaving Sans and Undyne standing together by the water. Sans resisted the urge to wipe away the sweat prickling on his skull with dread.

"so, uh..."

"Come on." Undyne grabbed him by the hand and towed him along. They turned right at the intersection, just as Papyrus had, but by the time they did so, his brother was nowhere to be found. Undyne hustled him along straight ahead, rather than turning left or right, so that they arrived at the gap presided over by the bird who never gave up, instead.

It eyed them hopefully. Sans eyed it warily. He knew, of course, that that bird would never rest until it had ferried them both safely across that disproportionately small gap. With him, it might even have managed it. With Undyne, they would potentially be there all day.

Undyne, as it turned out, had realized exactly the same. "Go on," she said, nudging Sans with her hip.

"uh..."

"Do your freaky blinky thing and get us over the gap."

"my what?"

"That thing you do when you say you're just taking a shortcut and suddenly you're halfway across the Underground."

"oh."

That was...more direct than Sans was used to being, about his powers. Papyrus took them as a fact of life, by now, and so rarely saw the need to talk about them. Flowey, of course, knew after countless resets of Sans using his powers to mess up his plans. Somehow, Sans had always thought that they'd gone unnoticed by the rest of the Underground.

He felt a little foolish, now, even as he took Undyne's hand. Sans took a step forward, and then another, and then another. It was harder

than it had once been, it felt as though he was having to pull the power up from the dirt like a rooted weed. Then the moment of difficulty passed just due to sheer familiarity, and he gave a little hop and a twist and felt the world bend around them so that suddenly they were standing on the other side of the gap. The bird was still looking at where they had been, but at the sound of their feet squishing in the grass, it looked around with wide eyes and ruffled feathers.

Then it looked rather disappointed. Undyne frowned in apparent sympathy, cupping a hand around her mouth to call out: "It's okay! I've got a guy coming through here later. You save your strength for him, okay? I know you can do it!"

The bird replied with a bright-eyed quack, obviously immediately cheered at the prospect. Undyne chuckled, turning away with a broad smile. "What a great bird."

"he's pretty cool, yeah."

"Anyway, c'mon."

On they went. On they went for a while, in point of fact, for long enough that Sans got Undyne talking just to fill the silence. More than once, he dropped some pointed hints that he could get them wherever they were going in a blink if he knew where they were going. More than once, Undyne told him that that wasn't the point.

Waterfall was much more sparsely populated than Snowdin, but there were still monsters living here and Sans had still passed through here while under Flowey's control. Not to mention that it was impossible to be in Undyne's company and not get stared at. Even if there was no longer a Royal Guard, she was still the Underground's greatest hero.

More than once, Sans reached back to pull his hood up, sometimes without even consciously realizing that he was doing it. More than once, Undyne tugged his hood right back down.

But even that wasn't so bad, after a while. After all, Undyne was trusted and respected for a reason, and on top of that, she was more widely known than Papyrus was. If the other monsters looked at her and saw that Sans was with her, then there could be no way they would think that Sans was still a danger. This was okay, this was better, this was...

...and then they rounded a corner to find Woshua industriously polishing a seemingly random section of floor, and suddenly nothing

was okay at all.

What Undyne Had To Say

"aw, moldbygg, you don't look like you're having fun anymore."

The gelatenous monster made several burbling, glorping noises of distress from whatever passed for its mouth, from where Sans had it suspended several feet off the ground. Sans laughed at the miserable sight it made, a laugh that sounded much more like his own than it had back in Snowdin, and then he lazily sent another volley of blue bones through the air. Moldbygg tried its best to stay still, but its very nature was against it. A few of the bones bit into its soul - not enough to kill, not yet, Sans could still only deal 1 HP of damage at a time. Even so, his victim had already taken a few hits. One or two more attacks would be enough to finish the job, and then, oh and then, **you'll finally get to know what it feels like, Sans, aren't you excited.**

Sans was still and quiet in the back of Flowey's mind, and all he felt from his unwanted passenger was a sense of paralyzing helplessness and dread, almost thick enough to taste.

A ring of slime pellets took form in the air around Sans, drawing in tighter and tighter, until suddenly Sans seemed to slide through space like oil through water, through the bullets like they weren't even there, until he was a foot to the left and entirely out of danger.

Flowey sighed in Sans' voice, shaking his head in mock disappointment.

"i guess there's no point in playing if not eveyone's having fun."

But *your* powers are so much fun, Sans. I'm so glad you finally decided to share!

Sans did reply, then, in a whisper barely louder than the rustling of the grass beneath his own sneakers. why them...?

Because they're here, Sans. Because they weren't smart enough to run away when Papyrus told them to. And now it's time for you to gain a little LOVE!

He swiped Sans' hand through the air, and a circle of spinning bones bloomed into being around the helpless, wounded monster in preparation for the final strike...

...only to be punched through and beaten back by a spiral of water that

came up from the ground around Moldbygg.

"Wosh u SOUL!"

Through the dim light cast by the path beneath his feet, Flowey could make out a figure approaching at a hasty shuffle, accompanied by the sound of sloshing water and the smell of detergent.

Flowey grinned, and Sans had no choice except to grin with him.

Two for the price of one.

"hi there, woshua."

The bird perched atop Woshua was fluttering its wings, sending drops of water everywhere. "Sans...?" The monster's eyes widened in comprehension, and horror.

Flowey raised Sans' hand. Something *took shape in the air just over his head. Its jaws gaped wide, blue fire blazing between its teeth. Like this, he could take Moldbygg out and leave the newcomer alive just long enough to watch.*

"bye-bye, woshua."

The gasterblaster fired, and Flowey was so consumed with watching the doomed monsters to notice the shadow dropping down from the ceiling until it landed right in the path of the attack and raised a shield to meet it. It didn't take the entire force of the attack, but it kept the force of the attack entirely on Undyne, and she was much, much better equipped to take it.

The light faded, leaving nothing except smoke and echoes behind. Sans and Flowey found themselves face-to-face with a nightmare in black, spiky armor, with a glowing blue spear held in hand.

"Run," said Undyne, risking only a brief glance back. Moldbygg splatted pitifully to the ground. Woshua looked as though it very much wanted to help. In the end, the best it could manage was to not shriek in fresh terror as it turned and ran, and Moldbygg ran with it.

Undyne watched them go, and then turned back to the skeleton blocking her way. Flowey realized then that he'd been so shocked he'd loosened his grip, if only for a moment. It had still been enough to let Sans move, to let his passenger lift his arms and spread them wide in silent invitation.

There could be no discerning any expression on Undyne's face through that helmet. As it turned out, they didn't need to. She simply responded by raising her spear, just as silently. Flowey giggled at the sight.
"hehehehehee! oh, *please*. like you're really going to do anything. even *papyrus* wouldn't forgive you for..."

Then even Flowey fell silent, as Undyne moved her spear just enough that its tip was aimed at Sans' right eyesocket.

"Run," *she said, and it seemed as though even the light from the grass grew darker with fear. Suddenly, even Flowey felt a little less certain about how this might go.*

Jump, *he ordered Sans. He had to dig in his thorns and drag his puppet along a little, as Undyne took one step forward, and then another and another. Then at last Sans ran, as only Sans could.*

* * *

Sans was brought rather aggressively back to reality by Undyne's hand tightening its grip on his shoulder to the point of pain. He blinked, and he was in a different room, a different time. He'd also been just about to run again until Undyne had stopped him.

He didn't know why Undyne was stopping him. Woshua had stopped in its work and both it and its bird were regarding Sans with equally unreadable expressions.

"h-hey there, woshua," Sans said, and immediately winced.

Both bird and monster considered him for a little longer, until at last Woshua answered with a simple: "Hi."

"i...i w-wanted to say..."

"Start with 'sorry'," Undyne prompted.

"yeah. sorry. i mean, not that i wanted to do any of that. i, uh, i wasn't myself. i really, really wasn't myself. but i'm, i'm sorry i wasn't strong enough. to stop that from happening. and i'm sorry it happened." He was babbling, badly. They were both *looking* at him and Sans didn't know what they wanted. He knew that what *he* wanted was to disappear.

He almost did, when Woshua padded over to them, its feet making damp little "plops" on the already damp cave floor. Undyne held him

fast, however, and Sans forced himself to let her. Whatever was about to happen, he told himself firmly that he deserved it.

Woshua raised their arm. Sans ducked his head and closed his eyes...

...only to feel a stream of cool water poured over the top of his skull.

Once the feeling stopped, Sans risked opening one eye, and then the other. The first thing he saw was Woshua, beaming up at him in evident relief and satisfaction as it lowered its watering can.

"Green means clean!" it chirped, and Sans knew that, to Woshua, this was as good as I forgive you.

"There we go," Undyne declared proudly, clapping them both on the shoulder. "Was that so hard?"

Sans deigned not to answer, and decided to just try and make certain his shaking knees didn't speak for themselves. Woshua couldn't have understood everything of what had happened. Sans wasn't even entirely sure he understood everything of what had happened. He wonderd now if maybe that didn't matter. Maybe all that mattered was Woshua believed Sans hadn't wanted to hurt anyone, and forgave him for the fact that it had happened anyway.

"Have a tidy day!" Woshua said to them both, waving, before returning and plodding back over to resume its work.

"You too, dude!" Undyne called, waving back. Sans just managed to rouse himself to do the same a second before Woshua turned its back. This time, Undyne actually had to give Sans' shoulder a little shake before he'd move, and they both turned around and carried on their way.

Undyne waited until they were a few more halls away before she spoke again.

"I know that none of that was your fault. I know you fought like hell. You have nothing to be *blamed* for, Sans. But sometimes when you apologize, it's not about who's to blame. Y'know?"

"maybe. i think...maybe i could figure that out."

"You will."

"so, was that what you wanted to show me?"

"Nah. Just a happy accident. It's just a little bit further where we need to go."

"cool. that's cool. and hey...if, uh, if we happen to meet moldbygg on the way..."

"I'll get its attention for you."

"thanks, undyne."

As it turned out, they really didn't have much further to go. This part of Waterfall was dark, far away from the gem-studded ceiling. The wood of the walkway creaked gently under their feet as they went along. Sans was physically exhausted, which at least made a nice change of pace from being exhausted down to the soul. Just thinking about how far he must have walked today made him want to curl up and take a nap right here on the path. His bones ached with the effort of just keeping up, and so Sans didn't mind the silence quite so much.

So of course, this time it was Undyne's choice to break it. "Hey," she said, and it was only then that Sans realized she had fallen a pace or two behind him. "You know we all want you to be okay, right?"

"yeah. i know."

"You know Papyrus wouldn't have brought you out here if he didn't trust me, right?"

"papyrus trusts you more than anyone."

Now Sans was confused. He wasn't easily confused, and so things that made him confused often made him suspicious in the same breath. He tried to keep that out of his voice, but didn't quite succeed.

"Cool," said Undyne. She was still behind him, but he heard her beam. "Glad we understand each other."

"what do we...?"

They were at the very edge of the bridge. It had once been a longer bridge, stretching high over the garbage dump. Sans remembered that Undyne had chopped the edge clean off in her pursuit of the human. By rights, it should have been repaired long ago, but most of Waterfall's other denizens made use of the ferry, or the bird.

He remembered all of this in a blink, in an instant, just before Undyne

picked him up bodily and heaved him over the edge.

* * *

"Well. *That* could certainly have gone better. Wouldn't you agree, Sans?"

Sans slumped to his knees in a distant part of Waterfall. All he knew was that it was distant. All he cared about was that it was distant, and that they were alone.

All he cared about was that he was still alive, and how bitterly, brutally unfair that was. For just a moment, when he'd looked up at Undyne, he'd thought, he'd hoped…but of course, Flowey was right. Papyrus would never have forgiven her.

"Heeheehee! And that's as far as anyone really cares about you, isn't it?"

It certainly seemed that way. It certainly couldn't be out of any consideration for him that they all insisted on leaving *him like this. He was going to die, just because his soul hadn't gotten the message yet didn't mean that wasn't going to happen. It* was *happening, slow enough to feel and yet not slow enough to stop. Even Sans couldn't will himself gone any faster.*

He would have, if he could.

"But we can still have so much *fun* before then, Sans! You don't want to stop playing with me, right?"

He felt himself nod, felt the roots around his neck squirming and flexing to puppet him effortlessly. Sans was so tired, and every inch of him hurt so much. Of course, none of that mattered to Flowey. None of that had to stop Flowey, and the evil little flower knew it.

The evil little flower knew it, maybe enough to get complacent.

By the time Flowey felt the fresh hope flaring in Sans' soul, Sans was already moving. His hand lashed out, grabbed ahold of a large fragment of rock that had fallen from the ceiling at some point in the distant past, and brought it forcibly at his own skull. The first blow left him seeing stars, the second left shadows creeping in at the edges of his vision, and then the rest of his body exploded with fresh agony as he tried for a third hit, hoping to hear a crack.

Instead, his hand froze, a scant hair's-breadth from striking himself again. Thorns were pressing in at every joint, and he felt Flowey's anger smoldering inside his skull like lava.

"Oh *dear*, Sans. Were you lying to me?"

This time, Sans made himself nod. He even managed a very faint smile.

The rock was knocked ever-so-gently against his skull.

"I could have told you that wouldn't work. A soul can't erase itself. Even the laziest and most useless soul. It's just not how the world works. A snake might as well try to eat its own tail."

"s-saw parsnik try that once…"

Sans felt himself tugged rather forcibly onto his hands and knees, though his fingers remained clenched around the rock. He saw fresh green creepers peeking out from the edge of his coat sleeve, keeping his fingers curled tight.

There was a moment of pressure, and then his right eyesocket went briefly dark as Flowey forced himself back out into the open air. He saw his bodysnatcher sprout out a few more inches, at least until he could comfortably turn and look back at Sans.

"Of course, if you give up hope, that's a completely different story. But you *haven't* given up hope, Sans. You might think you have. You might wish you would. But you know that your brother is still out there. You know that at least he refuses to see how worthless you are. And as long as you know that, there's always going to be a tiiiiiiny little babybones part of you that waits for him to save the day."

The face within the halo of golden petals began to blur and morph for a moment, until Sans was looking at a caricature of his own face, as a babybones – no doubt an image sucked up from the memories Flowey was slowly learning how to dig into.

" *'papyrus, where are you? i'm cold, i'm hungry, i don't know where i am!'* Hee hee. Sound familiar?"

It did. He'd only ever gotten lost in the woods once in his life, but it remained as one of the worst memories of his life. Papyrus had found him in the end, though, even when Sans' voice had seemed so small and faint in the shadow of the trees. He'd found Sans and bundled him up and carried him home, fussing all the while.

He'd thought that he'd given up hope then, too.

"Oh, maybe that's just it, Sans. Maybe you don't *really* want to kill yourself. After all, that would make Papyrus sad! Maybe you just wanted to help him, by hurting me. Maybe you just want to try and slow me down, by breaking my new body. **Maybe you just want to punish yourself for being this weak.** That's probably it, isn't it?"

Sans nodded. He genuinely didn't know, in that moment, if that was Flowey's choice or his own.

He saw the hand holding the rock move. He saw himself lift it up, and position it carefully over his other hand.

"Here. Let me help you with that!"

* * *

Sans awoke. He awoke with much sputtering and flailing, his left eye flaring bright. Undyne did not relinquish her grip even as her soul turned blue. "Easy," he heard her say, her voice as soothing as it could ever be. "Easy does it."

Running water. Darkness. Garbage. Undyne. Falling.

Followed by, in defiance of all logic and reason, not dying.

They were in the garbage dump – further along than he would have been, had he simply fallen. Undyne must have come down here and carried him further in. For now, she sat against the wall in the shadows of one of the looming garbage piles, and he had been leaned against the wall beside her, at least until she'd grabbed ahold of him to stop him pitching right into the sludge in his semiconscious panic.

Sans tried to stop panicking. The strange thing about Undyne was that she actually made that quite easy. It wasn't that Undyne wasn't dangerous to be around. The events back on the upper levels of Waterfall were a reminder of that if anything was. It was more that, if you were with her, you knew that she was by comparison the *only* dangerous thing you had to worry about. To someone like Sans, who had spent so much of the last few days reluctant to even step outside, he realized then and there that it was actually a rather freeing state of mind.

Which still left the matter of recent events to discuss. Sans found that he had some difficulty knowing where to start.

“you…uh…”

“Go ahead.”

“you kinda threw me off the bridge?” There. That turned out to be less hard than he’d thought.

“Yep. And then I jumped right down here to catch you.”

“thanks?”

“Don’t bother. I didn’t need to.” Undyne’s movements were a little slow and jerky as she released his shoulders and made to sit back against the wall. Sans remembered himself, and released his grip on her soul. “You caught yourself. Then, uh, you passed out anyway. So that was kind of weird.”

“i caught myself? uh, how?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t know how you do that weird glowy floaty thing.”

Turning a monster’s soul blue involved convincing the soul that gravity was other than what it was for the rest of the world – heavier, reversed, or similar. It was thus possible to achieve an approximation of flight by reversing a soul’s gravity in very rapid succession in multiple directions as needed.

Sans knew all of this on an academic level, had even managed to achieve as much himself, once or twice. The effort was exhausting, but the theory was sound, and oftentimes that was all he ever needed to test ridiculous ideas. Still, he’d never before tested it in circumstances that were quite so dire.

He realized after a beat that he actually felt…pleased with himself? From the way Undyne was grinning, she certainly felt pleased with him, as she patted him on the back hard enough to make Sans rock forward a little. “So good job, nerd.”

“thanks.”

Undyne got to her feet and offered him a hand up. Sans took it after only a moment’s hesitation. “but, uh, please tell me today isn’t going to involve me getting thrown off any more bridges.”

“Nah. It was boring enough waiting for you to wake up the first time.

C’mon, now for some fun.”

“your kind of fun or my—”

Undyne used her grip on his hand to drag him along. Only for a few steps, though – then she looked down at their joined hands, seemed to remember something, and let him go. Sans kept walking with her anyway.

Fortunately, Undyne was also the sort of person who talked easily while walking, and so the indignity was somewhat eased by Sans finally getting an explanation for today.

“So, I’ve been checking in with Papyrus. Just seeing how you guys are doing. Papyrus told me that you still weren’t doing all that great.”

“i’ve been…”

“If you say ‘fine’, I’m dragging you right back up to that bridge and throwing you off again.”

Sans closed his mouth.

“And for a while, I didn’t really know why you weren’t fine. I mean, we kind of had to mess you up to get that weird little flower to go away, and that sucked. You still should have been healing faster than you are.”

“…sorry.”

“If you say '*sorry*' again, I’m—”

Sans held up a hand in a gesture of peace. Undyne let out an irritated little huff, and carried on.

“And then I thought about it, and it was so totally obvious. Like, for two days, someone took your body away from you. They took and used it all *weird*. Like when someone borrows your shoes and when they give them back you can’t get the knots undone and the insides smell weird.”

That was one way of looking at things.

“And the only way to get used to them again is to walk around in ‘em! Tie the laces up however you want! Make sure they smell like your own stinky feet again!” Undyne fistpumped with the sheer force of her conviction.

Sans, meanwhile, found himself nodding along in comprehension. He wasn't quite sure yet what he was comprehending. Just that he was comprehending something, and it was a good feeling.

"so the point of all of this was...what? getting me used to my own body again?" Sans laughed, and he meant for it to sound amused. He mostly sounded bitter. "it's not like i used it all that much anyway."

"That's not the point! I mean, what you said was the point was the point but what's not the point is...ngaaaaahhh!" She pressed her hands over her temples, letting out a growl of frustration that bordered on a battle cry. At the sight of her, Sans couldn't help grinning. He knew Undyne meant well, knew that she pretty much couldn't not mean well. She had still thrown him off a bridge.

"Yes, the point was to get you used to your own body again! Maybe you don't use it all that much and maybe you should but that doesn't mean anyone should use it *for* you! It should be your own damn choice to waste your own damn time! Do you understand me?!" She whirled around and jabbed him quite firmly in the ribcage.

Sans nodded hastily. Of course, he knew he would have nodded even if he hadn't understood, because Undyne really could be rather terrifying when she got going. Still, this was definitely something to think about, maybe even something better to think about.

This time, Undyne led the way up and into the clearing past the garbage dump, to the intersection, and on to the dark room of glowing mushrooms. The path they wound up taking was one not lit by glowing mushrooms - you either had to know the way by heart, be accompanied by someone else who did, or just be really daring in putting your feet down on an unknown surface.

Sans had never been this way, but it didn't take long to guess which way it was. He'd heard stories.

"i have nothing resembling a swimsuit."

"Yeah, you do. Papyrus bought you one."

"what."

"And you'd better appreciate it, too. I was on the phone with him when he did, and I have never heard him in that much pain."

Sans felt his soul flutter in excitement. Could she really mean...?

She could. As the air grew warm and took on a faint scent of sulphur, Undyne took off the bag she'd been carring around all day and rummaged around inside. For herself, she set aside a suit that Sans had no doubt had been picked out by Alphys. For Sans, she tossed over a set of swim trunks that, when Sans held them up to the almost nonexistent light, turned out to be decorated with tiny pine trees.

"oh my god." He was certain that his very eyelights had to be glowing brighter in sheer excitement.

"Yeah, yeah."

"no, no - you don't understand. swim trunks decorated with trees."

"Sans, so help me..."

"my brother got me *tree trunks*." Sans was grinning so hard that his skull hurt. "my brother is the *best*."

"Yeah, he is. And I guess you're not so bad either, nerd."

Waterfall was quite cold in general, and so spots like the hot springs were generally quite crowded. Everyone was always willing to make room for Undyne, however, and Sans just didn't take up that much space. If anyone had a problem with him being there, they didn't have enough of a problem to give up their spots or surrender the warmth. That, Sans supposed, was something.

The peace turned out to not even entirely be a matter of practicality. Greater Dog and Doggo turned out to be spending their day off at the hot springs. Greater Dog still leaned his entire weight against Sans in search of love and affection. Doggo asked for a light for one of his dog treats. Maybe they'd spoken to Dogamy and Dogaressa, maybe they hadn't. From these two in particular, however, even Sans couldn't doubt that they were okay with him.

It still probably helped that Sans mostly slept through the rest of the afternoon, his arms folded on the bank of the spring and his head resting on them. The warmth was pleasant after Waterfall's deeper chill and the ache in his bones, and Sans even fancied that the water's various minerals were soothing to his burns. He didn't cause any trouble or raise any fuss, and so no one did the same for him. Sans was just content to listen to the various conversations mulling together, voices raising and lowering over the sound of water sloshing, as he drifted in and out of sleep.

When he woke for the last time, it was once again to the sense of movement that wasn't his own. This time, however, he also woke to the feel of hair in his mouth, bright red against his eyesockets. It was to the sound of Undyne singing an anime theme song.

More to the point, Sans awoke to feeling aching and sopping wet from warm water. This fact was a reminder as much as anything that he could choose to walk, if he wanted to. He could make that choice, and he could have walked.

But it had been a long day, and he didn't particularly want to.

"H-Hey! Hey, Moldbygg!"

Sans had let his eyes drift closed. He opened them sharply again, and couldn't quite keep his grip from tightening reflexively around Undyne's shoulder. If Undyne noticed, she didn't call him out on it. She was too busy trying to get the slime's attention.

"Moldbygg, hey, come over here a sec, we want...oh."

Undyne's voice faded away, to the sound of a series of hasty "plops" retreating further away down the corridor. For a moment, she was still. For a moment, all was silent.

Then she started walking again, and Sans closed his eyes again. "Sorry," she mumbled, just loud enough for him to hear. "They'll come around."

"s'okay. thanks for trying."

Maybe, if making apologies wasn't always about blame, refusing them wasn't always about blame either.

That rang a bit hollow, even in the privacy of his own skull. Maybe it was something to think about, at least.

An Evening with Alphys

It was something Sans was still thinking about the next morning, when he walked along the oppressively familiar trail to Grillby's. It was earlier than he was ever awake, by choice, but sometimes Sans' impossibly messed up sleep schedule could work in his favor.

He'd walked this path even more often than usual in the last few days. Even walking it had once been rare enough for Sans, but until recently he'd been either especially unwilling or especially unable to use his powers. Though the snowfall over Snowdin was eternal, it felt as though he must have worn a trench through the dirt beneath it.

Even the dogs weren't awake this early. Grillby was, because he had garbage cans to take in. He incinerated the contents every night, and took them in every morning once the acrid smell of scorched metal and burning trash had had time to dissipate. For all that he had this power, however, Grillby was not physically very strong, and so the process could take him a little while. Sans knew this, because his friend was at his chattiest around closing time, when the restaurant was nearly empty. Sans, meanwhile, never had anywhere else to be at that time of night, certainly nowhere else he would have preferred to spend it with besides Papyrus.

So he wasn't remotely surprised, when he came around the back of the restaurant, to see Grillby standing there, one garbage can already returned safely inside. He was surprised to see that Grillby was simply...standing there, rather than bringing in the rest. He was just standing and staring at a random patch of snow.

Sans watched him quietly for a moment longer. When Grillby still didn't seem inclined to move, he grew concerned and gave a polite cough. "hey, uh..."

Grillby's flames flared a little higher with surprise, and he whirled around so abruptly that Sans found himself taking a step back, holding up his hands defensively. "um, h-hi?"

"Sans." Slowly, Grillby seemed to settle, though the wounded side of his face was slower. His burned eye seemed a little less blackened and useless, though perhaps Sans was only deluding himself due to the comparatively darker outside. Sans realized with an uncomfortable lurch in his soul that he was staring. Then he realized that Grillby probably hadn't noticed because he was staring at Sans.

Not that staring was anything new. The burns had started to heal, especially after a bath in the springs, but slowly. He still looked a mess. They both did.

Grillby broke the standoff first, averting his gaze and reaching to hoist another trash can. *"Good morning,"* he said, polite as ever. *"How are you feeling today?"*

"good. well...fine, at least. better." Sans winced at the sound of his own voice, pathetic and hesitant as it was. He certainly hadn't been the most chatty, as of late, even though he'd been getting better around Papyrus and Undyne. Now, it was almost as though he could feel all the progress he'd made over the course of the last several days escaping through his fingerbones like water. Sans hastily stammered to turn the conversation around. "how about you?"

"I am well, thank you for asking."

"hey, uh, glad to hear it. you, um, you need any help getting those in?"

"No, thank you. I can manage."

Sans stuck his hands deep in his coat pocket, and tried not to take a quick shortcut out of there. He could tell this was not going well, though he had no idea how to possibly make it better. Grillby was never the chattiest, either. Now his answers seemed almost terse, designed to deflect any part of this conversation away from himself, designed to leave Sans with as little as possible to say. Of course, his behavior towards Sans within the restaurant over the last several days could have been said to be much the same. Sans had just tried to reassure himself that it was only due to the normal business of running a restaurant at all. Out here, before the day really got started, things should have been different.

Here and now, Sans had no idea why he'd been foolish enough to think that. But he was here, anyway, and leaving would feel too much like giving up.

"listen, i, uh, i just came here to say..." What? What had he come here to say? *Do you hate me? I don't blame you? I don't understand?*

In the end, what came out of Sans' mouth was: "i'm not sure i'm going to be coming around so much, this week. i just, uh, didn't want you to worry about me."

"Oh."

The upside was that this earned exactly the reaction Sans would have expected from Grillby. The downside was that this reaction was disappointment and as visible as any emotion ever was from his friend. Grillby looked at his feet, looked back up at Sans, and then looked down at his feet once more. *"May I ask why? Is the food no longer to your liking?"*

"no, grillby, of course that's not..." Sans trailed away with a tired sigh. What *did* he mean? "hell, you're probably wasting that food on me anyway. it's like i can't taste anything, anymore."

"That has never been a problem for you before. Clearly, the fault is with the food." By which Grillby meant, of course, *the fault is with me.*

"don't say that. there's nothing clear about any of this!"

Grillby took a step back, and Sans realized that his hands hurt even more from being clenched so tightly. Deliberately, he uncurled them, and then buried them in his pockets again instead.

"i mean, let's be honest with each other about that much, yeah?" he mumbled. "it's not like you want me around anymore anyway."

"Sans...!"

"if you won't say it, i'll say it for you. my face might be a mess, but my eyes work fine. heh. guess my face must be more of a mess than anyone's letting on, since you hardly even look at me..."

"You don't understand!"

Sans closed his mouth hard enough to make his teeth click together. Grillby's flames were blazing high enough that melted snow was starting to patter off the roof of the restaurant like rain. Yet having started, Grillby didn't seem to know how to finish, and when the flareup passed it left him looking pale and strained once more.

Sans forced himself to look up at his friend, and forced himself to speak slowly. "you're right," he said. "i don't. tell me."

Grillby looked towards the restaurant. He looked for a long moment towards a seemingly random patch of snow. He looked back at Sans, and seemed to reach a decision.

"I am sorry," he said. *"To have caused you any pain. Your appearance does not alarm me, Sans. It* grieves *me. But perhaps...that is as it should be."* Again, his gaze flickered, left, right. *"Perhaps I should pipe down on the subject, as it were."*

So much was being said that could now never be unsaid. The fundamental problem at hand was still going unanswered, perhaps because neither of them knew the words to ask the right questions. Yet it was also more than that, deeper than that. Even if Sans' eyes worked just fine, maybe there was something he wasn't hearing.

Unfortunately, before he could make another attempt, Grillby had picked up another garbage can and turned to bring it inside. Sans could have offered to help. He perhaps should have offered to help.

He also recognized a dismissal when he was on the receiving end of one. While normally, he was also just as capable of cheerfully ignoring one, this was shaping up to be one of the worst days since he'd gotten his body back. So it made him somewhat dizzy to remember that he'd only just woken up.

Sans' shoulders slumped. His head bowed. He turned for home. "guess i'll see you around, grillby," he tried to call back over his shoulder. It came out as more of a mumble.

Grillby glanced back at him for only a flicker.

"You know where I'll be."

* * *

For once, Sans was not in the mood to just go home and sleep. He was usually in the mood to sleep, but he could feel his thoughts chasing one another in circles and knew that even a marathon of *Cooking with a Killer Robot* wouldn't be able to quiet them. Going home would just lead to a lot of useless tossing and turning. He needed a distraction to ease the pressure in his skull.

Fortunately, Papyrus was there to provide just such a distraction.

“SANS!” his brother called out, almost the second Sans walked through the door. “PLEASE CHECK YOUR PHONE!”

The taller skeleton was sitting at the kitchen table, a mountain of jigsaw pieces piled up beside a half-finished jigsaw. With Sans eating out nearly every night, for a given value of “eating”, the table had

gone unused for actual meals for a while. Papyrus just ate his food sitting on the kitchen counter, and commandeered the horizontal surface for his puzzles instead.

“um,” was the first thing Sans said. The second thing he said was: “why?”

“I HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA! I RECEIVED A MESSAGE FROM DOCTOR ALPHYS THIS MORNING, ASKING ME TO ASK YOU TO CHECK YOUR PHONE.”

“oh. guess i’ll go check my phone, then.”

He had to dig it out from beneath the couch cushions, though. Once he had, sure enough, there was a text from Alphys waiting for him.

“Hey, Sans! =(^o^)= How are you? I hope things are getting better, but I’d like you to come down to the lab when you can! :o Just to make sure! Sorry to bother you. You know me lmao. I bother everyone \o/! So please let me know as soon as you can when you can stop by, thaaaaaanks! 8D “

Sans stared blankly at the text, before cautiously tapping out a reply.

“sure. tomorrow ok?”

He’d only just stuck the phone in his pocket when it buzzed in reply. *“Great! See you then ~(^-^)~ !”*

“papyrus?” Sans called over his shoulder. “can you take me to hotland tomorrow?”

“I MOST DEFINITELY CAN DO THAT! PLEASE ASK DOCTOR ALPHYS NOT TO THROW YOU OFF ANY HIGH CLIFFS, THOUGH. I HEAR THAT IS MUCH LESS FUN IN HOTLAND THAN IN WATERFALL.”

“i think she’d be okay with that.”

So that was that, then. That still left him with the day to himself. A day to dwell on the latest bit of awkward unfortunateness with Grillby.

Somehow, that had come to seem like an even less pleasant prospect than it had fifteen minutes ago. Sans cast his mind about for a safer distraction, a touch desperately. Fortunately, as ever, Papyrus was nearby.

“hey, uh,” Sans began hesitantly, drawing a little nearer to the table.

“do you need any help with that?”

“NO THANK YOU.” Papyrus beamed proudly, laying a hand on his ribcage. “THIS PUZZLE’S THOUSAND PIECES ALL TOGETHER STILL CANNOT STUMP THE GREAT PAPYRUS!” He nudged out the table’s other chair for Sans with his foot, and Sans felt himself relax. “IF YOU WANT TO, YOU CAN SIT HERE WITH ME, AND I CAN EXPLAIN HOW I AM BRILLIANTLY SOLVING THIS PUZZLE. THAT WAY, YOU COULD LEARN A LITTLE MORE ABOUT BEING AS BRILLIANT AT PUZZLES AS ME!”

“ah, i dunno.” Sans fought not to grin too obviously in relief, as he took the offered seat. “i don’t think i could ever be as good at puzzles as you, papyrus. but hey. maybe i can get close.”

“YOU DEFINITELY CAN, JUST AS LONG AS YOU TRY YOUR BEST! NOW, *MOST* PUZZLE-LOVERS WOULD TELL YOU TO TRY TO FIND THE CORNERS FIRST! I SAY THAT IS SILLY! YOU SHOULD ALWAYS START FROM THE CENTER AND WORK YOUR WAY OUTWARDS…”

The fact remained that Sans wasn’t as good at puzzles as Papyrus, and so most of Papyrus’ lessons flew over his skull. It still felt as though even he learned a trick or two by the end, should he care to remember them, and all in all it was still a happy enough way to pass a morning.

Unfortunately, Sans was a puzzle that Papyrus had solved to his own satisfaction years ago. He surprised Sans with a reminder of that fact the next morning, as they sat together in the boat on the way to Hotland. Technically, Papyrus didn’t *need* to accompany Sans. If he’d recovered enough to make the trip to and from Grillby’s alone, he could probably make it from Snowdin to the boat and from the boat to Hotland. It was the “probably” that weighed on both their minds, however, and they both still felt better for one another’s company anyway.

“SANS?”

“yeah, bro?”

“ARE YOU AND GRILLBY FIGHTING?”

Sans could only greet this question with silence for a few long minutes. His arms were folded on the edge of the boat, his chin was resting on his arms, and he was staring at his own muddled reflection in the water.

Finally, he mumbled: “i don’t know. i think we might be? if we are, uh, i don’t know what we’re fighting about.”

“OH.”

Papyrus was uncharacteristically silent for a little while longer, to the point that Sans could feel the thoughts weighing on his brother. Finally, he replied: “I HOPE YOU AREN’T. HE WAS VERY WORRIED ABOUT YOU, SANS. IF YOU ARE, I HOPE YOU FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU’RE FIGHTING ABOUT, SOON.”

“thanks, papyrus. i hope so, too.”

Truth be told, he really wasn’t sure if “fight” was the right word for whatever was going on between Sans and his old friend. But it felt wrong and strange, and fighting with people felt wrong and strange, so that seemed the easiest word to go with.

Papyrus and the river person both filled the empty silence well enough for the rest of the trip. Once they reached the little bay that served as the drop-off point for Hotland, Sans hugged his brother, got out of the boat alone, and carried on towards Alphys' lab.

She didn't answer when he knocked. Fortunately, Papyrus had reminded Sans to take his phone along, and so Sans simply pulled it out and texted her. *"im here."*

Scant seconds later, he heard the pattering of feet drawing rapidly nearer to the door, and it whooshed open to reveal Alphys standing there, clearly having dashed down from upstairs. Her labcoat had been hastily thrown on over an anime shirt and a pair of shorts, and Sans was suddenly glad that Undyne didn't seem to be here, or else absolutely nothing would be getting done today.

"Um, h-hi," Alphys stammered. "Sorry, I, I was just...on the computer, and..." She slumped, looking embarrassed. "I mean, hi. Thanks for coming, Sans."

"no prob, alphys."

"How are you feeling today?"

"great." Except his tone was a little terse when he said as much, because Sans remembered Grillby asking him the same question the day before and knew that the answer wasn't any better now. Alphys flinched to hear it, and so Sans hurried on to add: "how about you

hook me up to some of your tech so we can prove it?"

"Sure. Come on in."

He did.

The actual examination took a surprisingly long while, for what had been proposed as a simple check-up. Sans could recognize the basic principle of most of Alphys' machines, but it had been years since he'd worked in any lab other than his own, so the specifics were beyond him and he was too tired to ask. Alphys, meanwhile, soon found herself too engrossed in her data to offer much of a running commentary. Judging by the persistent frown on her face, however, she was no more encouraged by his progress than Papyrus or Undyne had been.

"so tell me, doc," Sans said at last, when she'd gone without talking for a solid half-hour. "am i ever gonna play the piano again?"

Alphys twitched in surprise, before peering anxiously at Sans over the top of her clipboard. "Um, s-sorry!" she said. "I just, um..." She looked from her clipboard to Sans and then back again, and then she sighed and set the clipboard aside. "I, ah, I think I'll need to re-enter these numbers into the computer. Let them calculate for a little while longer."

"oh, yeah? how much longer?"

In the end, he stayed for dinner. It consisted of instant noodles, eaten on Alphys' folded-up bed while watching her new anime DVD.

"gotta say, alphys," Sans said, staring thoughtfully at the contents of the flavor packet dispersing in his bowl. "maybe not being able to taste anything isn't so bad. you seem to get along okay."

He thought he saw her blush, before mirroring him by staring into her bowl. "I know they're not for everyone," she mumbled. "But I don't eat them for the taste."

"kinda figured. you eat 'em because they're quick, right?"

"Well, I mean, that's nice, too."

"so what's the nicest?"

"It's more what I think about when I eat them."

They left the conversation there for twenty two minutes, as the opening credits finished and the next episode began. Only once that episode was over and the next round of end credits were going did Sans speak again. After all, *The Angel is a Full-Time Employee* really wasn't that bad.

"so what do you think about, when you eat instant noodles?"

He asked without missing a beat. This time, Alphys answered without missing a beat.

"Well, I think about Undyne. I think of all the times she used to come over just to watch anime, and now all the times she stays late for lab work. I-I mean, noodles aren't *that* different from spaghetti, right?"

"sure."

"I guess that's why she likes them so much." Now even Sans could see that her smile was fond rather than embarrassed. She twirled her chopsticks through the noodles like the heroic protagonist of the show twirled her fingers through her hair. "And I guess...it's not just Undyne, either. It's whenever I get to see my friends. Like you. Like now. This is just what I eat when I see my friends, so it's like, whenever I have noodles, I have all those times again, too."

Sans opened his mouth to speak. Then he closed it again, finding himself at a loss for anything to say. Alphys, unfortunately, took his silence entirely the wrong way. "S-Sorry," she mumbled, hastily loading up another mouthful of noodles. "I know it doesn't make any sense."

The next round of opening credits ended, and the conversation halted for another twenty two minutes.

"that's just it, alphys," Sans said, when the next episode was over. Somehow, his bowl was half empty, and his mouth was full of the taste of salt, fat, and whatever it was that humans deemed fit to call "seafood". "i think it does."

* * *

When the results of whatever tests Alphys had been running had once more been printed out, Alphys frowned at them for a long moment. She then circled something several times before passing the paper over to Sans. He took the paper and scanned it dutifully. Even then, it took Sans a minute to understand just what he was being told to look

at.

0.75/0.75

"that's...my hp level?"

"That, um, that looks to be the case." Alphys fidgeted a little, her tail thumping nervously against the floor of the lab. "I'm so sorry, Sans, I should have caught this back at the beginning. I was so busy focusing on your current HP that I never thought to check your maximum levels. I just assumed, and...I assumed wrong."

"well, uh, why wouldn't you? my max levels aren't supposed to change, are they?"

"It's not unheard of, actually." Alphys' tail curled tight around her feet, and she couldn't meet his gaze, and Sans remembered in a rush that left him feeling like a fresh chunk had been taken out of his soul.

He had mercy on her, then, and answered his own question.

"except just before a monster falls down."

"Y-Yeah." Alphys made what he could tell was a sincere effort to brighten up. "Um, at least that's not the case here! Your max HP is still on an upward trend, if my calculations are correct, even if it's happening more slowly than I expected. Assuming those calculations are, um, actually complete this time."

"but i'm still not where i should be." Sans gestured to his face, as the most obvious evidence of this. "is this an upward trend that looks like it will continue?"

He'd thought he had grown generally accustomed to the idea of going through life with only 1 HP. After all, barring certain complications or traps, he had his own ways to survive. He certainly hadn't thought it was possible to go lower, and now that he had, the knowledge left him feeling a little shaken.

"There's no reason it shouldn't. Whatever you and Papyrus and Undyne have been doing, um...keep doing it, I guess? Sorry. I know that doesn't sound like much help."

"it's cool, alphys. thanks. can i keep this? just for reference."

"Sure. I've got the files saved right here." Alphys reached out and

patted her computer monitor, and Sans folded up the readout paper and tucked it into his pocket. It was as he was doing this that Alphys spoke again. "Um...Sans?"

"yeah?"

"You know that, um...even if your face never heals all the way...that's not a bad thing, right? As long as the bone doesn't actually *hurt*, if some marks are still there...I mean, it could be worse, right? Just because the bone doesn't heal, that doesn't mean the soul isn't. I mean, that's exactly what we were counting on, before. That damage to the body doesn't always carry over to the soul."

"i know," Sans said, but the words tasted like ashes in his mouth. *Your appearance does not alarm me, Sans. It* grieves *me.* How could it not bother him, when it so clearly bothered one of his closest friends? Did Grillby really feel so guilty for doing what he'd had to, in order to save Sans' soul? Or did Sans feel guilty on Grillby's behalf, for not being strong enough to spare his friend from going that far?

Either way, he didn't believe his own words, and he could see by the look on Alphys' face that she knew he didn't believe them. She still didn't press the point, which was probably an act of mercy on her part. She only asked: "*Do* your bones still hurt?"

"sometimes. if it's too cold. or too hot. or i walk too much. hey, like you said, alphys. could be worse, right? hehehehe. at least it gives me even more excuses to sleep in."

"I guess so." She tried for a smile. "Still, um, none of this is to say that you shouldn't still take care. Just because your max HP levels are still rising doesn't mean that it isn't worrying that they were down so low in the first place, and, and it doesn't mean that there might not still be something...missing. Something we've overlooked. S-So, um, do you think you could come in again next week? Just to make sure your max HP is still increasing."

"sure. i was thinking of picking sentry duty back up soon. so i don't think undyne would mind if i used one of my legally mandated breaks to stop by. not like she couldn't confirm where i'd been, right?"

"Right! And let me get you some more medicine, before you go."

It was late, and Papyrus had been sending texts. So Sans helped Alphys clean up some of her equipment, in preparation for departing for the night. Once he had, she even left the lab long enough to walk

with him to the dock, and wait there for the river person to return on their circuit. Sans, meanwhile, was quiet, at least until he heard the whisper of water parting before the bow of a boat.

"hey, alphys?"

"Yeah, Sans?"

"do you think you'll ever tell undyne anything of what you told me today?"

Even in the relative gloom of the cavern, even as she ducked her head, Sans saw her blush. "Y-You mean, um, the thing about your max HP levels? Of course. I've been keeping her up to date on a lot of my findings, and she told me about your trip to Waterfall."

"not what i meant, alphys. i meant, y'know. about the noodles."

"O-Oh."

"Tra la la," said the river person, pulling up to the dock.

"just a sec," said Sans, glancing over his shoulder. The hooded figure gave an agreeable nod, and he could see Alphys look downright dismayed at being denied her apparent escape.

"Well, um, I mean," she stammered, fidgeting from foot to foot, her gaze darting every which way. "Do I...really need to? I mean, things are pretty good just as they are, right? I wouldn't want to, y-y'know. Mess anything up. Or m-make her hate me."

"i get that," said Sans, and he did, almost painfully so. "it's just that i don't think you'd be messing anything up. maybe, uh, maybe things would even get better?"

Alphys visibly forced herself to smile. "sure," she said, and Sans could tell that she didn't believe her own words either.

So maybe he could be forgiven if there was a touch of desperation in his voice as he asked: "think about it, at least?"

"I'll try."

That, at least, sounded a little more sincere. So Sans decided to take what he could get. Besides, it would be impolite to keep the river person waiting any longer.

He said his goodbyes, got in the boat, and asked to be taken to Snowdin. Alphys waved at him as he was ferried away.

* * *

The upside of being one of the furthest stops on the river person's route was that Sans never worried about sleeping past the point where he was supposed to get off. So once he was in the boat and Alphys had disappeared into the distance, Sans settled down for a long nap.

Which made it all the more annoying when he was awoken barely past Waterfall by his phone buzzing in his coat pocket. Grumbling, remembering why he tried to never carry the thing, Sans pulled it out and flipped it open.

Napstablook23 has sent you a friend request.

Napstablook? Wasn't that Undyne's neighbor? Sans knew the name, of course. The Blook Family snail farm had been in business for as long as anyone could remember. He just couldn't imagine why the ghost would be contacting him.

Out of curiosity, more than anything, he accepted the friend request. An UnderNet message soon followed it.

"oh...hello. i know we've never really talked before...but undyne told me that some bad things happened a little while ago...

i'm really sorry to hear that, and i was wondering...if you wanted, you could come visit me...and we could hang out, and listen to some music...and maybe that would help you feel better...or maybe not..."

Huh. Well, that was certainly a kind offer. Sans actually found himself smiling a little to read it. A good tune was one of the few things he could muster up any consistent appreciation for, in life. His trombone wasn't just for plaguing Papyrus' life with incidental music, though that was one of its best features. Not to mention that Undyne was probably a rather outgoing neighbor. Of course she couldn't have helped mentioning something about what had happened.

He sent a quick reply back. "*sure thanks. tomorrow ok?"* Papyrus would be so happy to hear that Sans was making the choice to get out and keep talking to people. Even if he was maybe fighting with Grillby, even if not everyone he'd encountered while under Flowey's control had forgiven him, progress was what was important. *Hope* was what was important.

Sans was especially sleepy from the day's travels and tests. He stayed awake long enough to see it when Napstablook sent a message back telling him that tomorrow would be fine. As he looked it over, Sans fancied that he even felt his maximum HP go back up by another few decimal points.

Visiting Napstablook

Papyrus was indeed overjoyed to hear that Sans had plans to go out and hang out with someone the next day, and the fact that it was someone back in Waterfall only made things better. After all, that meant he could have his cooking lessons with Undyne while Sans was next door.

"Hanging out with Napstablook, huh?" Undyne said, when they told her the plan at her house the next day. As Sans had expected, she beamed in approval. "Good thinking! They're a great ghost. Say 'hi' from me, okay?"

"will do. you two crazy kids have fun."

"WE WILL TRY OUR BEST TO SAVE YOU SOME SPAGHETTI!"

"thanks, bro."

Undyne moved aside to let Papyrus into the house. Sans, meanwhile, turned away and headed next door.

There were two houses in the adjacent cave, identically shaped and mirror images of one another. One was colored a dusty rose pink, and its windows were dark with the curtains drawn. The other was a ghostly white that almost seemed to glow in the dim cavern, and Sans could see lights pouring out. So he stepped up to that one and knocked on the door.

After a moment, the door opened to reveal a ghost floating just inside the threshold. "oh..." said Napstablook dolefully. "hi...you're sans, right?"

"yep. that'd be me. so, uh, is this still a good time?"

"oh...sure..." Napstablook floated aside. "come on in...i was just working on a new mix. if you wanted to listen, that'd be okay..."

"sounds great. thanks." Sans offered the most reassuring smile he could manage, before following the ghost into the house.

It was actually quite a pleasant house to be in. Most might not have thought that, perhaps, given that it was also incredibly bare. There was a refrigerator, a television, a desk with a computer, a stack of CDs along one wall, and not much else. There wasn't even a carpet. It

reminded Sans very much of his own room, except without that feeling of *hollowness* he felt whenever he was in or even thought of his own room.

"sorry..." the ghost said, floating back over to their computer. "i don't have any extra chairs..."

"no worries. i like to keep things pretty bare *bones,* myself."

"heh..." Napstablook gave a tiny little chuckle, and Sans grinned in gratification.

Napstablook did have an extra pair of headphones, though, and obligingly plugged them into their computer while they queued up some tunes. It quickly became apparent to Sans that, while he and Napstablook had never met face-to-face before, he'd certainly heard his music before. It was remixed and reposted all over the UnderNet until it was just one of those things that had always been there, like that one scream you always heard in human movies.

He told Napstablook as much, in between mixes, and the ghost seemed to waver briefly in the air.

"really? wow...you really think monsters like my music?"

"why wouldn't they?" Sans gestured at the computer. "this stuff is really cool, napstablook."

He wondered if he'd said something wrong when Napstablook actually seemed to fade a little in the air. "oh...i never thought..."

"well, uh...that's a good thing, right? that people like your stuff?"

"i mean, i always shared them just in case someone would...but if they're that popular? oh dear...that's a lot of pressure...now i'll disappoint that much more people..."

"ah, it's not so bad, having people disappointed in you." Sans waved an airy hand. "people are disappointed in me all the time."

"oh dear...that doesn't sound very good..."

"it's cool. the way i see it, no one would bother to be disappointed if they didn't still care, right?"

"i guess not..."

"so if a lot of people might be disappointed in you, that means a lot of people also care...about..."

Now the ghost was quite translucent. Sans trailed away lamely. "sorry. i, uh, i know i was going somewhere with this. and i think i lost it."

"it's okay..." Napstablook faded slowly back into proper visibility. "thank you for trying..."

"sometimes i forget that not everybody was lucky enough to grow up with a brother like papyrus, y'know?"

"papyrus...he's the other skeleton, right? the one who's always visiting undyne? yeah...he seems nice..."

"he is. he's *great*," said Sans, with more feeling than he had mustered up for anything in a while. "he's the coolest guy i know, and trying to be even half as cool as him, it gets me up in the mornings, y'know?"

"yeah..." Now he knew that he saw Napstablook smiling. "i think i do...he sounds a little bit like, um...like my cousin..."

"you have a cousin?" Sans thought of the house next door with the dark windows. The answer was about what he expected it to be with that in mind, as Napstablook tried to fade out again. So Sans changed the subject by putting his headphones back on.

They broke for lunch not long after that. Or at least, Napstablook broke for lunch, with much miserable apologizing that they had nothing to offer a corporeal guest. In exchange, they invited Sans to lie on the floor and feel like garbage with them for a little while.

"i know it's not much...it's just a family tradition..."

"hey, i'm a big fan of family traditions. in fact..."

In fact, he had been working really hard to get better. Sans had done a lot of walking and a lot of talking, all for the sake of getting better. He'd been thrown off a bridge, watched bad anime that had turned out to not be so bad, and had a maybe-fight with one of his best friends. Which was to say that Sans thought that he might just be owed a legally mandated break from trying to get better.

"...i think that sounds like a really great idea, my friend."

Napstablook smiled in relief.

So here they were, lying side-by-side on the bare wooden floor together. Their headphones were on their heads, a portable music player sat between them. The song that was playing was apparently called "Spook Sound". Sans lay there with his eyes closed and his hands folded on his chest, basking in the idea that he didn't have to do or say anything. He only had to sprawl and listen. That was all he felt capable of, that was all that was currently expected of him.

Though, as it turned out, he'd gotten out of the habit of completely switching himself off.

"oh...i didn't know you played the trombone..."

Sans opened one eye, to find Napstablook looking curiously back at him. Or at least, he assumed that look was curiosity. It wasn't exactly easy to tell, on a ghost.

"what now?"

"you were tapping your fingers...and trying to follow the music. i used a lot of trombone music for this, so i think i learned a lot...i'm sorry if i guessed wrong..."

"you didn't, actually. good job. though, uh, i don't know if you could really say i still 'play'. haven't touched it in a while." On occasion, he thought about what a shame that was. It was a shame he'd grown accustomed to living with, however, and so it was even harder than it might have been to do anything about that.

"oh...i'm sorry to hear that. if you ever wanted to start again, i have some new music you could play...or not...it's okay..."

"yeah? hey, uh, that sounds like it could be fun." And Sans was pleasantly surprised to realize that it really did. "thanks, napstablook. i might take you up on that."

"it's not a problem...it's not like i'm really using them anymore..."

"well, maybe we can both *scale up* our efforts from here."

"heh..."

That had been a particularly obscure pun thought up on the spur of the moment, and so the smile was an especially pleasant surprise. Sans was about to set to seeing what other music puns he could pull out of his skull, when he was interrupted by a frantic knocking at the door.

Napstablook floated into an upright position, frowning. Sans held up a hand to forestall his host.

"don't worry about it. it's probably just my brother." Except if it really was, Papyrus would be calling out Sans' name, calling out that it was time to go.

Whoever was on the other side of the door did call out, then, and it wasn't Papyrus. *"Blooky! Blooky, are you in there? Are you okay?!"*

"mettaton?" asked Sans and Napstablook together, sharing a look of bewilderment.

"Blooky, if you can hear me, open the door right now or I will kick it down!"

Napstablook floated right through Sans in order to do so. "sorry..." they mumbled, glancing back. "it's just that i need my door..."

"no prob. i, uh, i should probably go anyway." He didn't know if he should, actually, he didn't know whether or not Papyrus and Undyne were even close to being done. Sans did know that tone of voice, however. Whatever else he'd planned for today, he hadn't signed up for a family confrontation. Those could be the *messiest*.

So he got up, and he stretched. Then he followed Napstablook to the door, intending to slip out past Mettaton for the sake of heading back over to Undyne's. He could always take a nap out in the larger cavern while he waited for them to finish. That should have been a safe enough distance.

Napstablook opened the door to greet Mettaton. The robot's normally immaculate hair wild and disheveled, his eyes were wide, his fist was half-raised to continue pounding on the door. Mettaton looked at the ghost. Then his gaze moved over to Sans, and his eyes narrowed. He bared his teeth, and his hand lashed out to try and grab a hold of the skeleton.

"There you are."

All of this had taken such a sudden turn, all of this was happening so fast and was so *surreal*, that Sans was almost too shocked to dodge. It was the feeling of fingers closing around the shoulder of his coat that jolted him into action, and suddenly he was standing back in the middle of the room without having taken a step. Mettaton looked briefly startled, but recovered quickly, stepping past Napstablook and

even flinging out a protective arm. "Are you all right, darling?" he asked his cousin.

Napstablook wavered visibly in the air, tears gathering in their dark eyes. "mettaton, i-i don't understand..."

"that, uh, that makes two of us," said Sans cautiously.

"Quiet, you!" Mettaton snarled, rounding on him once more. He pointed dramatically, clearly firing himself up for something. It was something Sans knew he didn't want to be here for. "I see I got here right in the nick of time! Did you really think I wouldn't come to my dear cousin's rescue, after you sent me such *awful* messages?!"

"what...?"

"*what*?!" Sans took another stumbling step back, raising his hands in an attempted gesture of peace. He was nevertheless piercingly aware that he was running out of room to back up. He had to hop out of here. Where should he run? Undyne's house? Home? Mettaton was so clearly incensed that Sans couldn't believe he wouldn't come looking either way. "hey, so, uh, i don't know what you think i did..."

"I don't *think* you did anything! You *told* me precisely what you planned to do to Blooky!"

"i *didn't*. he *invited* me over..."

"actually..." said Napstablook. "i just...wasn't really doing anything...so i didn't mind. but i wasn't really expecting you to drop by...sorry..."

"Well," Mettaton huffed, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his phone. He brought up something on its screen, and showed it to the ghost. "*Here* is why he 'happened' to stop by."

Napstablook took a long look at the screen. And then they faded entirely from sight. Mettaton turned back to Sans, and the look in his eyes promised imminent violence.

He lunged, and Sans dodged, sliding through the air like oil through water until Mettaton's back was against the wall and Sans was at the door. Sans didn't dare turn his back on the robot, so he just blinked himself directly out into the cave instead. Already, he could feel himself getting tired, but as soon as Mettaton saw him through the window, he was racing outside. Sans screwed his eyes shut and jumped *again*. Unfortunately, he found that he could only make it out

to the bigger cavern immediately beyond the snail farm, not even far enough away for Mettaton's footsteps to fall out of earshot. And indeed, as Sans tried to decide which of the four other paths to take, or to muster up his energy for another hop, the robot raced into view. He had both hands held palm-up, and a bomb in each of them.

If any one of those hit him, there was no way Sans wouldn't die, and then there would be no time for explanations. He made a very quick decision, and with a swipe of his hands, summoned a spinning circle of blue bones around Mettaton, pouring all the power he could into his voice.

"Listen to me."

The sudden threat of damage was enough to make his opponent stop running. Shock was enough to make Mettaton hesitate for a moment. But the fuses were burning down, and so Sans tried to talk fast.

"i don't know what you think is going on. hell, i'm not sure i know what's going on anymore, but whatever you think i said, i *didn't*, i was *never* going to hurt them..."

"So it was all a joke?!"

Sans resisted the urge to growl with frustration. Mettaton clearly wasn't in the mood to listen. Then again, was that really so surprising? If someone had sent Sans messages that were apparently especially explicit in their desire to harm his brother, would he be any more inclined to act differently, had he been capable of doing so? He didn't know. It didn't matter. More bombs were appearing, clustered around Mettaton, and as Sans watched they spun out to hover in a pattern surrounding them both.

Even he wouldn't be able to dodge this many.

"You think it's funny, joking about hurting a poor, innocent monster like Blooky? Then *this* should really give you a laugh!"

The fuses were burning down and Sans tried to pull up enough power for one more hop...

"Mettaton, *what the hell do you think you're doing?!"*

Undyne's voice. And both skeleton and robot looked around to see both her and Papyrus standing at the mouth of the hallway leading to her house. Undyne was still wearing a chef's hat. Papyrus was still

wearing an apron and holding a whisk. Napstablook hovered behind them, tears pouring down their body.

"SANS!" Papyrus cried in alarm, racing over to help his brother, racing *right into the bombs*.

Sans took a stumbling step back, shaking his head. "s-stay back..." he tried to yell, but his voice seemed to freeze in his mouth and his teeth were chattering. "don't..."

One by one, the bombs faded from existence, leaving only the echo of fuses burning in the air. As Sans watched, Mettaton executed a twirling leap up and out of his makeshift prison, landing beside it without any more hairs out of place and with his HP no worse for wear. Papyrus, meanwhile, dropped to his knees beside his brother, reaching out to rest both hands on Sans' shoulder, trying to get the other skeleton to just look at him. "SANS, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? WHAT HAPPENED?"

"i didn't...i *didn't*..."

"I KNOW. WHATEVER HE THINKS YOU DID, I KNOW YOU DIDN'T. I KNOW IT WASN'T *YOU*! SANS, *LOOK* AT ME...!"

Even as Papyrus physically placed himself within Sans' line of sight, it wasn't fast enough to stop Sans from seeing Mettaton holding up his phone to Undyne.

Sans felt like he was breaking into pieces. He could feel his bones creaking with the effort of remaining unbroken, could feel cracks spidering throughout his soul. It was never going to end. No one who wasn't related to him was ever going to trust him again, and if they ever did, there would always be someone nearby to remind them why they shouldn't. Sans hadn't done this, he *knew* he hadn't, Flowey wouldn't have let him forget something like this. But it had clearly *happened*, and so maybe he would have.

It was never going to end. He was always going to be the skeleton who got taken over by an evil yellow flower, the one who tortured Moldbygg and almost killed Woshua and maimed Grillby, who had come to Napstablook's house meaning no harm except *maybe he had*. Just because he was free didn't mean he was safe, it had *never* meant he was safe. Sans had allowed himself the mercy of forgetting as much and now look where it had gotten him?

It was never going to end. He was never going to be free of this, not

really. One day they would even forget the flower and only remember him. That was how it had always happened before. *We'll be together forever, Sans* and Papyrus' voice was echoing in his skull except it was being twisted into Flowey's laughter. He *hurt*, body and soul, and of course he did, *there were roots and vines twined around his bones, thorns digging into his spine, and Sans could feel himself being pushed deeper and deeper into the depths of his own skull...*

Papyrus was shaking him. Sans only dimly felt it. It didn't matter.

This was never going to stop, and they'd both been happy fools to think otherwise.

Sans closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, even Papyrus flinched away from the dark pits his eyesockets had become.

"I can't," Sans said, and then he was gone from Papyrus' arms, gone from Waterfall, collapsing limply into the snow in the shadows of the woods.

* * *

"*SANS!"*

It took Undyne a crucial instant to realize what had happened. Papyrus had his back to her while he saw to his brother, and Sans was short enough to be effectively obscured from her sight by this. Besides, there was no sensible reason for him to have done what she realized he'd just done.

But as Papyrus scrambled to his feet, looking around frantically and calling for the other skeleton in a voice that made her soul feel as though it had been torn in half, Undyne saw that Sans was gone.

"SANS, COME BACK! TH-THIS ISN'T FUNNY! PLEASE COME BACK… PLEASE…"

"Where'd he go?" Undyne asked, hastening over to join her friend.

"I-I DON'T KNOW! HE DIDN'T SAY! WHY WOULD HE RUN AWAY, UNDYNE?" Papyrus stared at her pleadingly, as though she could make sense of all of this. There were already tears in his eyesockets, and Undyne wanted to punch *the entire world* for making her friend cry. "HE KNEW WE'D PROTECT HIM, S-SO WHY WOULD HE RUN AWAY…?"

Even Undyne, to her very great chagrin, could not punch the entire world. However, the sound of footsteps behind her reminded her that there *was* at least one good target for her frustrations.

"You!" she snarled, whirling around and pointing at Mettaton. "Get your metal butt over here!"

Mettaton and Napstablook had been heading back down the path towards Napstablook's house. At the sound of her voice echoing through the cavern, Napstablook quickly blinked out of visibility. Mettaton had no such escape available to him, and she could see him drawing himself up in preparation for getting offended.

Then he took another look at her face, and he came over. "I fail to see why *I'm* to blame for any of this," the actor huffed. "When Blooky and I are clearly the injured parties here!" He held up his phone for evidence of this fact.

Undyne glanced back at Papyrus, saw him reaching out as though to take the phone with curiosity plain on his face. She caught his wrist and shook her head. "Trust me. You don't want to know." When he opened his mouth to protest, she spoke over him, perhaps more sharply than she should have. "I *know* Sans didn't send those threats! Honestly, he's way too lazy to have thought up half of them. *I* wouldn't have thought up half of those, and I *love* violence. It's just a matter of who *did* set this up."

Papyrus closed his mouth, and now even Mettaton was looking a little less certain of himself. They were both looking to her to decide what to do.

Fortunately, Undyne was very good at deciding what to do. Sometimes, there was no time to decide whether you were taking the right path or the wrong path. All that mattered was taking a path at all.

"Did he say where he was going?" she asked Papyrus.

"NO."

"So we split up. You get home, I'll look around here…"

"WHAT ABOUT HOTLAND?"

"Damn, you're right." Undyne frowned, gnawing on a thumb-scale. Despite her best efforts, it was a good day if Alphys even left the lab.

Who else did they know, in that part of the Underground? Finally, she settled on: “01 and 02 might still be visiting 02’s parents. They owe me, like, *all* the favors. I’ll give them a call.”

“I presume,” Mettaton drawled. “That if you’ve called me over, you have some sort of plan for me.”

“Yes. To yell at you for causing this, and maybe to ask Alphys to stick you in the biggest, ugliest vacuum cleaner she can dig up at the dump!”

“There’s no need for that sort of talk!” Mettaton snapped back, hackles rising. “And there’s no reason *I* couldn’t be responsible for searching Hotland. I probably know more people in the Underground than either of you combined!”

“I wouldn’t trust you around Sans even if you *did* find him!”

“PLEASE GO TO NEW HOME,” Papyrus said suddenly.

They both stared at him, then. Even Undyne found herself caught off guard. She knew that one of Sans’ many part-time jobs had once been to serve as Judge to Asgore. She also knew that, when the Queen had taken over, she hadn’t kept him on. Not to mention it was one of the most crowded places in the Underground, with next-to-nowhere to hide. Would he really go back there?

Mettaton seemed to share her hesitations. Then he looked at Papyrus’ face, at the tears still shining in his eyesockets, at the way his jaw was set slightly crooked with his resolve. As he did so, Undyne could see Mettaton’s anger waning. Papyrus had that effect on people. “All right,” said the robot softly. “Is there anything in particular I should keep an eye out for, while I’m there?”

“YES. PLEASE DELIVER A MESSAGE.”

“To who?”

Papyrus told him, and Undyne raised her eyebrows in surprise. Papyrus told Mettaton the message, too, and the robot was so visibly startled that he laughed aloud.

“My, my!” he declared, clapping his hands. “What a very interesting sight that should make!”

Papyrus’ expression didn’t waver an inch. The skeleton still looked

drawn and tense and scared, worse than even Undyne had ever seen him, bad enough that she reached out an arm to squeeze his shoulder in what reassurance she could give.

“We’ll find him, Papyrus,” she said. “We won’t let anything bad happen to him. I promise.”

“SOMETHING BAD HAS *ALREADY* HAPPENED TO HIM!” Papyrus cried, and seeing him break free of his shell-shocked stupor should have been a relief. “AND I DIDN’T KNOW IT WAS HAPPENING, AND WHEN HE TRIED TO TELL ME, I DIDN’T HEAR HIM! I THOUGHT I WAS TAKING CARE OF HIM! BUT NOW HE’S GONE AND IT ISN’T BECAUSE FLOWEY TOOK HIM AWAY, AND I DON’T KNOW WHAT I’M GONNA DO IF HE DOESN’T WANT TO COME HOME, UNDYNE, I DON’T *KNOW*…”

“Stand to attention, soldier!”

Papyrus snapped into a salute so abruptly that she heard his ribs vibrating for a few seconds. Out of the corner of her eye, Undyne saw that even Mettaton was standing a little straighter. Undyne otherwise ignored the robot, however, focusing all her considerable intensity on her friend instead.

“Look at me, Papyrus,” she said, planting herself right in his line of sight, bracing her hands on her hips. “Who am I?”

“YOU ARE UNDYNE, FORMER CAPTAIN OF THE ROYAL GUARD, UNPARALLELED SPAGHETTORE, AND ALSO MY VERY COOL FRIEND.”

“That’s right. I’m *so* cool that I wound up being *too* cool even for the Royal Guard, so I had to take a job doing nerdy scientist stuff and teaching nerdy little kids so I didn’t cause a coolness singularity! And do you know one thing cool people *never* do?”

“THEY NEVER LIE?”

“They never, *ever* lie. So if I tell you we’re going to find your brother and not let anything bad happen to him…”

“…THEN WE’RE GOING TO FIND MY BROTHER AND NOT LET ANYTHING BAD HAPPEN TO HIM!”

“That’s right!” Undyne fistpumped with determination, and even if it was a little shaky, Papyrus moved to copy her. “Now get moving! I

want to hear a phone call from Snowdin in five minutes or I'm gonna kick your butt so hard it breaks the barrier!"

"YES, MA'AM!" And without another word, Papyrus turned and raced off down the passage towards the bird that never gave up. He could have gone the other way and taken the boat straight home, of course. But they all had a long distance to cover, and so there was no point in wasting the chance to search at least one stretch of Waterfall along the way. Besides, there were people in Snowdin he could call for help, to hold down the fort until he got there.

This left Undyne alone with a robot who looked as though he would have greatly preferred not to be left alone with Undyne. "Should I really go to New Home…?" he asked her, visibly skeptical. "Is that really the best use of our resources right now?"

"So it's 'our' resources now?" Undyne demanded, folding her arms.

Mettaton had the decency to flinch. "It seems that we've all been deceived today," he said. "Whether by Sans or by someone else. One part I absolutely refuse to play is that of the fool. And so I want to find out what's going on as much as you do, especially since whoever is behind all of this had the *indecency* to involve my dear cousin. "

"Let me give you a hint – whoever was behind this, it *wasn't* Sans!"

"All the more reason for us to ferret out precisely who the real culprit is! If you're both at such a loss, then it seems as though you're in no position to turn down my help, now doesn't it?"

He wasn't necessarily *wrong*. Not to mention that even Undyne was doubtful that Sans would go to New Home, even as panicked as he'd obviously been. If Mettaton was only going to deliver a message, then that would keep him out of their way while they did the real work. And if delivering that message actually did anything…

"If Papyrus says you go to New Home, then you go to New Home," she said firmly. "You owe him that much. And, um, maybe pick up Alphys on the way back. Just in case. Take the boat, too. You've got the longest way to go out of any of us."

"It seems so." Mettaton smiled. Maybe it was a relieved sort of smile, maybe a smug one. She couldn't tell, and wanted to hit him for it, even as he offered her a bow right out of one of Alphys' princess animes. "No sooner said than done."

Then she found herself forced to glance away, as he morphed from a basically-human shape into a basically-calculator shape. It was an uncomfortable process for flesh-and-magic beings to watch.

Mettaton wheeled around in preparation for zooming off, and then promptly wheeled right back around to face her.

“One more thing,” he said. “Before I dash off…would you mind apologizing to Blooky for me? I’ll call him later, of course, but…I really did mean to call earlier. I never meant to let it go this long. And I *certainly* didn’t mean to make quite this much of a mess of his day.”

“Sure,” said Undyne. She thought she might even do it. “Now get going.”

He did, speeding away with the sound of rubber squeaking on stone. Because Napstablook really was a pretty good neighbor, Undyne went to pass along Mettaton’s regrets before she dashed off to start digging through the garbage dump.

Lovesickness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was something of a running gag in the Underground to wonder why they had weather. It wasn't a very *good* running gag, but monsterkind had learned to take their humor where they could find it. Grillby had certainly heard worse, late at night when the last of his regular patrons were drunk on whatever they considered intoxicating.

hey, grillby? why do skeletons hate winter? because the cold goes right through them!

Grillby, for his part, had never really thought much about it. He'd narrowed his world down a long time ago to the restaurant and its care, and his life had been significantly more simple and painless for it. Only burn as brightly as you had the fuel to spare. Those were the words he tried to live by, because he'd seen too many monsters fail at even that much and fall down to never rise again.

But now, as he tromped through the sleeping town of Snowdin towards the dark woods, as snow fell thick and fast around him, Grillby found himself reconsidering.

He'd brought an umbrella out of consideration for the impossible weather. He'd also donned a rather gaudy sweater that had been a gift years ago from his niece. He probably should have added gloves, but that much cover made the sense of smothering too much to bear. Besides, he burned hot enough on his own to be capable of melting the snow into rain before it fell on him, though all that really meant was that he wound up getting rained on instead. In small amounts, it was irritating rather than painful. It was just an irritation that could be avoided. Besides, he tried to take special care these days, after the "accident" with the sink.

How does it feel, to know that Sans is the one who hurt you?

Two panicked phonecalls from Papyrus about Sans being in danger were two entirely too many, in Grillby's very definite opinion. And to think, he'd been missing the days when it had just been a matter of calling Papyrus to come and pick Sans up when he fell asleep at the bar. He'd narrowed his world down a long time ago to the restaurant

and its care, and the last time he'd tried to step beyond that, he'd gotten half a pot of soapy dishwater thrown in his face.

Yet here he was again. When Papyrus called him, he should have passed him along to the Royal Guard. Yet Papyrus had called *him* instead, and that…had meant something. Grillby was trying very hard not to think of what. He was trying to just focus on finding Sans.

Unfortunately, not all were so considerate of his determination.

"Aw, did Sans run away again?"

Against his better judgement, Grillby stopped dead. He did not, however, look around. He didn't have to. He knew just what he'd see, if he did.

"Did you have anything to do with this?"

"Everyone's always so eager to blame *me*," Flowey drawled. "When will you idiots learn that I don't ever really have to do anything? All I do is dig up what's already in your rotten hearts."

"Just what happened to make you hate Sans so much?"

"Hee hee. It's a long story, and you wouldn't understand it anyway. Even though you've *lived* it dozens and dozens of times before."

Right. Riddles about "resets". The flower had grown fond of rambling on about such things in an attempt to get Grillby riled up. It had worked, for a while, and so now Grillby discarded such talk out of hand, for the sake of his own sanity.

"I do not care about other timelines. I care about this one, and this Sans."

"Too bad. He's still going to die. He's too weak to do anything else."

"We'll see."

Grillby kept walking. While he knew that the little yellow flower could follow him if it wanted to, it couldn't do so in a way that allowed for prolonged conversation. Grillby allowed himself to be grateful for small mercies now, and prepared to waste energy trying to incinerate it to a fresh crisp later if it became necessary. Right now, Flowey was *irritating*, but Grillby reminded himself fiercely that it was not necessary.

Flowey, however, was never one to retreat without one last parting

shot.

"You really still think you'll be enough to make him want to come back? Hee hee hee! **You really are an idiot, a r e n ' t y o u ?**"

Grillby stopped. He took a deep breath.

Then he whirled around, and shot a fireball at the patch of snow where the little golden flower had sprouted up. Flowey disappeared with a yelp and a puff of smoke, leaving only a circle of dirt and scorched grass behind.

Grillby turned away, only to see the flower sprout back up out of the snow, between two trees ahead of him.

"Well, then. If you *really* don't want to know where Sans is..."

He managed to force himself to take three steps past Flowey before he stopped again.

"You wouldn't tell me honestly even if you did know."

"Sure I would! You think I put in all this work just to see Sans lie down and die in the snow? No way. That would be way, *way* too easy." The flower smiled with much too many teeth. It smiled just as it had made Sans smile, before it had made him throw the pot. "I want to see how many of you he can drag down with him instead! Even so..." The moment passed, and Flowey looked as innocent and cheerful as it ever did. That, Grillby was slowly coming to realize, was also when Flowey was at its most dangerous. "...*you* want him to get better. For some reason. And even if it's not going to work, you'll still need him back before you can try, right? Since we both want Sans around, no reason we shouldn't work together to bring him back, right?"

Grillby tried this idea on for size, turning it this way and that for cracks in Flowey's logic. On the surface, it made sense - a twisted, brutal kind of sense, but a sense that was not out of line with what he'd seen of Sans' tormentor so far.

Grillby *was* worried. The woods were vast, the snow was falling, Papyrus had called him for help, and Grillby was worried. There was no guarantee that Sans was even *in* Snowdin Forest, it was just the most convenient area for Grillby to search while he waited for Papyrus to return, while Sans' other friends searched in other places.

Yet when he turned to face Flowey again, it was with another fireball

waiting as a warning in his hand.

"Be that as it may, I don't trust you anywhere near Sans. Whatever it takes, I will not allow *you near Sans again. We as his friends will be more than sufficient to find him, and care for him. I was wrong to doubt that."*

Flowey smiled up at him, entirely unafraid. Grillby wished he could even be disappointed by that fact. He'd inadvertently given it a great deal of practice at dodging fireballs, over the last couple of weeks. "Heh. Well, if you say so…"

"I do."

Yet Grillby couldn't help feeling as though he'd lost the conversation, or let an opportunity pass him by, as he turned and kept walking. This time, at least, he didn't stop.

* * *

His hands were shaking, badly enough to make the pots rattle. Unwilling to risk another accident, in his current state, Grillby stepped outside, hoping that the shock of some cold air might jolt him back into order.

He closed the restaurant's back door behind him and leaned against it. He tipped his head back to stare up at nothing very much. Despite the pain still crackling through his body with every step and every breath, Grillby could feel happiness and relief piling up in his soul like fresh coal. Sans was back home safe. He was, if not okay, then at least himself. *They could take care of the rest. They could take care of him. It would be all right now.*

"Wow. He really *messed you up, didn't he?"*

Grillby hastily stood straight up, flaring a little higher in surprise and immediately wincing as he did so. He looked around, and in his haste, he looked right over the scorched and blackened little plant that had sprouted out of the snow. Then it registered fully in his mind that it had eyes, and was looking back at him.

Grillby stared at it, narrowing his working eye. Fire always knew its favorite prey, and if he squinted, he could see that beneath the soot and scorch marks were signs that the petals on this flower had once been golden.

He didn't hesitate, extending a hand and sending a fireball arrowing towards it. The flower disappeared in a puff of steam as the snow around it evaporated instantly, and Grillby let out a breath.

"So that was rude."

This time, the voice came from right by his shoe. Grillby had scrambled back several paces before it even occurred to him to try stomping on the evil little plant instead. Of course, if one of his fireballs hadn't done the trick, if being scorched out of Sans hadn't done the trick, his shoes probably wouldn't have been sufficient either.

"Get out of here," *he said, keeping his voice as steady as he could around the pain.* "I believe we have made our thoughts on your control of Sans clear enough."

"No kidding," the flower drawled. It smiled, and Grillby suppressed a shudder as a lick of heat raced up his spine. "And you just couldn't finish the job, could you, hothead? Oh, don't even bother." It rolled its eyes as he held up another fireball in warning. "You can't even hit me, and even if you could, you're nowhere near as hot stuff as that machine they used. Now that was awful. *Hee hee. Sans thought he was going to be so cool, making us both stand there and get roasted. But it didn't take any time at all before he was* ***screaming and begging and crying for it all to stop.****"*

Grillby tried not to flinch. He failed, and the flower saw it. It smiled up at him with far too many teeth, before frowning thoughtfully down at its own scorched and shriveled petals.

"It still hurts, you know. It probably always will. And I *was buried in his thick skull for most of it. How bad do you think* he *still feels?"*

He was trying not to think about it, honestly. Especially since Sans hadn't even been able to make it from the door to the bar on his own, so Grillby thought he probably didn't need to guess.

The flower looked back up at him and asked, in a wheedling sort of tone: "Want me to tell you how he feels?" As though it was making an offer, rather than a threat.

"You know nothing of Sans' soul."

The flower rolled its eyes and outright scoffed at him. Grillby, meanwhile, realized that it was the first time he'd spoken in a few moments. He realized that the flower, for all the lies and other cruel things it was saying, had almost had him hypnotized.

"Oh, please. I know more about that smiley trashbag than you do." It puffed itself up importantly. "I know more about him than anyone. Maybe even his own stupid brother! I had all that time to pick his soul apart and

see what made it tick. I sucked up his memories like ketchup and they were ***delicious*** *for how pathetic they were. I probably could have been an even better him than he was, if you all hadn't butted in!"*

"You know Sans when he is afraid and in pain. That means *nothing* to a monster's true nature." *This flower couldn't appreciate the way he lit up when he truly smiled, or the way there was always a kindness glowing within him even through the weariness...*

"That's just it, hothead. That's not the only way I know him. I've been his worst enemy, and I've been his best friend."

He could tell by the look on its face that the flower wanted him to ask. Grillby turned resolutely away instead, meaning to head back into the kitchen and ignore it.

"Why, I've even helped set you two up, in the past!"

His hand froze on the doorknob. Grillby felt as though his very soul had just been doused in icy water.

It took a second before he felt something slither over one of his shoes. He kicked out, and even if he didn't connect with anything, the feeling vanished even if the flower didn't move away.

"Don't look so surprised," it cooed, in a voice like flypaper. "Honestly, even with all the resets I've seen, you two dancing around each other like idiots *is one of the things that never changes. I've helped him confess, I've helped you confess. I think I even remember the last time you did, if you want to hear it. 'Sans, we've known each other for so long'--"*

"Be quiet."

It closed its mouth. The smile that remained on its face told Grillby that this was only by its choice, not his. Not that he was at all surprised. He hurt*, body and soul, and his voice betrayed it.*

So of course, the flower chose that moment to deliver the killing blow.

"And I've seen that it never works out."

The flames on his hands were already burning low and strange from the water damage, and Grillby fancied he saw them falter even further at that. "I think you would hardly tell me even if things had worked out," *he said. His voice sounded hollow and empty as smoke. He barely recognized the sound, could barely believe what he was saying. He was talking as*

though he believed or agreed with this flower's assertion that he had lived other lives in other times. But really, in light of everything else that was going wrong, that might have been the most minor issue for the here and now.

"Oh, no. I'd totally tell you all about how you two lived happily ever after. That'd make it even better when I ripped him away from you."

And now he felt himself flaring higher. Now he found it in himself to stand a little straighter. "You can empty the entire contents of the sink over me, if you wish. I will not let you hurt Sans again." *He opened the door and made to step back into the kitchen, meaning to go right back out into the bar and tell Sans and Papyrus that Sans' bodysnatcher was still alive, was still much too close to Sans...*

"Sure. Go ahead and tell Sans that it was all for nothing. Go ahead and tell Papyrus that he put his brother through hell for nothing. I'm sure that'll go over just great.*"*

Grillby stopped, cold air at his back as it blew into the kitchen. Could it read his mind? Or had he just been that transparent?

"It wasn't for nothing. You are out here, and Sans is inside."

"For now. And you know...it takes it out of you, being burned alive. I'm pretty tired. I could maybe do with some nice snacks to try and pick myself back up. If you were to be so accommodating, Grillby, I might *be more focused on taking care of the body I have than trying to grab a new one. Even if the owner of that new body isn't really doing anything important with it."*

Grillby mulled over this for a moment, trying to mentally translate the flower's words into comprehensible speech. Finally, cautiously: "You are saying that if I leave out food for you, and keep quiet about your presence here, that you will leave Sans alone?"

"You got it. I won't even try to take his body again once I'm all healed up. Scout's honor! It's not like you can do anything to stop me, otherwise."

Grillby gave this offer what consideration he was capable of.

Then without another word, he shot another fireball at where the flower was resting, right at his feet. Surely, at such a close distance, he couldn't miss.

Once again, the flower disappeared with a yelp in a puff of smoke and

steam, leaving a circle of melted snow and scorched dirt behind.

Once again, it rose up out of the snow a few feet away, no worse the wear. It winked at him, sticking out its tongue in an expression of utter, unashamed childishness.

"See?"

Grillby saw.

And so, hating himself viciously for it all the while, Grillby stepped back into the kitchen. He grilled up a burger and yet another order of fries. He piled it all on a plate and left it in the snow behind the building, hastening back inside before he could see whether or not his offer had been accepted.

By the time he stepped back out into the restaurant proper, it was to see that Sans and Papyrus were preparing to leave. Sans smiled when Grillby bagged up a worrying amount of remaining food to go. The expression seemed to tug and twist his face in strange and painful ways, and so Grillby almost wished he wouldn't.

His hands were still shaking. If either of them noticed, they didn't say.

* * *

The snowfall was coming particularly thick and fast tonight. Sans noted this fact with a distant, dull curiosity, as he watched it pile up on his sleeves where he lay. He wondered how long it would take before he found himself buried beneath it. He wondered what would happen then. Would he die? Would he fall down at last? Would it matter?

Probably not.

So Sans just passed the endless seconds, motionless and freezing, and watched the snow slowly piling up on his coat. His hands started to ache fiercely from the cold, the bone looking particularly brown and dirty against the bright whiteness of the snow. Then his hands went numb as the snow obscured them from view, and Sans was happy. He felt snow piling up on the side of his skull, before falling in flurries around his body when the piles grew too big. His face hurt from the cold, then went numb, and Sans was relieved.

Papyrus would be worried. Papyrus would be frantic. Papyrus would be *looking*. It felt as though the knowledge of this fact was trying to drag him bodily back to his feet. But it wasn't enough. After all, even

if Papyrus found him and brought him home, as he had the last time Sans had gotten lost in the woods all those years ago, what would it accomplish? It would just lead to him pouring more of his time and energy into someone who was never going to get better. Someone who didn't deserve it, and who never had.

His brother was the best possible brother anyone could ever have hoped for. Sans was lucky to have him. Had been lucky to have him. Papyrus, meanwhile, had never deserved to get stuck with a brother like Sans.

His thoughts slipped away like another drift of snow settling over him. Sans felt the weight and not much else. He probably couldn't even have gotten up now if he wanted to. Either way, there was no point in trying now, was there? Maybe later. Maybe never.

Right now, there were shadows eating at the edges of his eyes and he wasn't cold anymore and Papyrus would be worried but Sans was so tired if he just closed his eyes…

…and yet the shadows served to make the light in the distance seem all the brighter. As Sans stared at it, feeling that last spark of curiosity refusing to die, he realized that it was also a light that was drawing nearer and nearer. It was moving much too purposefully to just be a random traveler, and anyway, no one in Snowdin would dare be outside in this sort of weather.

Papyrus would have been calling for him. Undyne would have been calling for him. Who else would be bothering? Mettaton, perhaps? Sans felt his soul sink a little deeper into the mire of his own misery at the very idea. Just the idea of staying awake long enough for Mettaton to light into him again was especially excruciating. Better to just close his eyes now.

Or maybe he could try standing up. Just long enough to move away and find somewhere better to settle down, so that the last thing he heard wasn't a robotic rockstar yelling at him.

That seemed like a sensible enough idea, even if it was an idea that would involve some effort. So Sans struggled to rise, snow gusting and blowing around him as it fell from his bones. He barely made it to his hands and knees before his entire body lit up with pain, every joint seizing with it, and Sans cried out in pain before he could even think to grit his teeth against it.

"Sans!"

Sans slumped heavily back into the snow, cursing it, cursing himself, cursing the voice. He stared straight ahead, in too much pain from the cold to register much else at first, even as he saw a pair of shoes come into view between the trees ahead of him.

The newcomer hurried over to kneel down in the snow beside him. The first thing Sans realized was that they were warm. Even with that in mind, he didn't properly realize who they were until they reached out and he saw sparks and smoke in the air.

"grillby?" Sans mumbled, frowning in honest puzzlement. The cold seemed to make his thoughts as sluggish as the rest of him. "what are you doin' out here?"

"What am I..." Grillby sputtered a little in indignation. *"I am looking for* you*, Sans!"*

"why?"

"Papyrus called me. He told me that you'd run away, he's scared out of his wits..."

"oh."

"'Oh'?!"

Yet even now, being told directly by one of his friends that he'd left his brother terrified, Sans couldn't help feeling guilty. Maybe that showed on his face, because Sans thought he saw Grillby's expression soften, and he knew he saw him hold out a hand. *"Come on. None of that matters now. Let's go back."*

Sans tried to reach out, and immediately winced as his bones protested the movement. Grillby frowned, took his hand anyway, and tried to pull him upright. Sans' vision went white from pain, and when awareness returned, he was on his back, being held up out of the snow by Grillby's arm around his shoulders. The fire monster's other hand was holding tight to his, and even if the warmth was a painful contrast against the cold, it wasn't *as* painful as the cold all on its own.

"You're frozen solid," Grillby murmured in disapproval, moving his free hand to brush against Sans' forehead.

"heheh..." Sans' faint laugh turned into a fierce coughing fit, and Grillby held him tighter as it lanced up his spine. "h-heh...that's what

happens when you lay in the snow. not that you'd know..." He could feel the snow turning to slush through his pants. Grillby was trying to burn hotter just to keep the cold at bay. Unfortunately, it was a very big forest and he was just one monster who shouldn't have been out here in the first place.

Sans rested his forehead against his friend's chest and just tried to breathe. Every gasp he took felt like a knife sliding just another inch deeper between his ribs, as cold air blew through his eyesockets and mouth. He couldn't quite bite back a whimper as he felt Grillby move him, but he tried. Fortunately, this time it was just for the sake of being settled against a tree. The fire monster knelt in front of him, shielding Sans from the wind. He reached out and gathered Sans' hands in both of his, and brought them to his mouth.

Sans shuddered, just a little, and found himself forced to close his eyes.

"Sans. I need you to stay awake."

"i *am*." His jaw felt thick and clumsy, his teeth ached from how tightly he'd been clenching them. "it's just..."

Even when trying to burn hot, Grillby was no warmer than what might be felt over a heating vent, or when sticking your hand over a pot of boiling water. But the sight of orange and white flames covering his charred fingerbones was still a sight that made something lurch traitorously inside of Sans. If he closed his eyes, there was just the warmth of Grillby's touch and breath, as he tried to work life back into the burned and frozen bones.

"hurts," was all he managed. It still seemed to sum up a great deal.

"I'm afraid that it's going to," Grillby said quietly. *"This is not an easy process. Try and move your fingers for me, Sans."*

He tried. Sans almost felt his fingerbones creak with the effort as he slowly curled and uncurled them. A low growl of pain sounded in the back of his skull, as he tried to pull them against his chest.

"Shh." The effort was still enough to satisfy Grillby. Sans felt his hands released, felt Grillby's hands slide down along his wrists and over the sleeves of his coat. He heard the fabric start to steam lightly, as the heat worked to evaporate the melted snow that had otherwise saturated his clothes. *"It's all right. I'm here."*

"'m tired," Sans mumbled, still with his eyesockets shut.

"Stay with me, Sans. Stay awake just a little longer."

"'m tired of *hurting*, grillby."

The warm touch stilled, and Sans felt that the other monster was even holding his breath from shock. Then the moment passed, and he felt that breath ghosting over his arms once more.

"Pain isn't forever, Sans. All you need is a little more fuel."

"oh, yeah? how much more 'fuel' are you guys gonna waste on me, anyway? undyne, alphys, papyrus..." He thought of them all. He thought of the time and work and words they'd poured into him like oil in an engine, and how it felt as though all of it was leaking out through the cracks in his soul that had been there since the beginning. He thought of how far he'd thought he'd come, and his eyesockets burned with tears of frustration at what an idiot he'd been.

"You are not a waste. You are worth all the time and assistance that has been offered to you, and more." Sans' arms were tingling faintly as sensation returned. He felt those hands slide all the way up to his shoulders before Grillby faltered again. *"I should have offered you more than I did. I should have been there for you, more than I was. I thought I had my reasons, at the time. I will tell you what they were, later. What matters now is that I was wrong, Sans. And I am sorry."*

As early as yesterday, these would have been words that Sans was hoping desperately to hear even as he never expected to. They were an assurance that he hadn't done anything to drive one of his closest friends away, that even in the midst of everything else he wasn't quite *that* broken.

But a lot had happened since then, and now how could he believe anything else? It hurt to refute the offered support, and it was painful to accept it, too. What difference did it make?

"papyrus hasn't slept in his own room in weeks. he hasn't slept through the night in weeks, because neither have i. he's always *there* to wake me up. or let me know when i'm zoning out or, or forgetting. he's tired and he doesn't want to be and he doesn't want me to see that he is, but he's my brother so of *course* i do. and i'm tired and i don't want to be and i don't want him to see that, but of course he does. papyrus is working so hard to help me be okay, and *i don't remember how*."

He hadn't thought that was something he could forget. It wasn't even just because of Flowey. It was because of what Flowey had done, in light of the world the human had left behind. It was a world without resets, a world where time progressed like a river ever onwards, and whatever happened would always have happened. It wasn't just a matter of holding on a little longer anymore, because however long he managed to pretend to be okay, he would still have to. It would never end, anything he did would always be remembered, would always *matter*.

Didn't they realize how terrifying that was? Except of course they didn't. No one else except Flowey knew.

Sans had forgotten how long he'd wished for the world to be that way again – a place where people remembered, a place where he could live instead of survive. Flowey had made him see what an idiot he was. Survival was just about all he was capable of. That didn't mean he should drag anyone else down with him.

All of these thoughts passed through Sans' head in an instant, beneath the light of Grillby's eyes. The thought that followed them was that he could feel tears on his cheeks. He realized that he was crying openly as his last pretenses at defenses crumbled away in the snow. Even as he thought of trying to stop, a sob tore through him from deep inside his soul.

He stared up at Grillby through eyesockets made blurred with tears, vision distorted until there could be no discerning the expression on his friend's face. That was suddenly, impossibly terrifying, and left Sans feeling so foolish and *alone* that he was amazed he didn't crumble to dust in that instant. All he knew was that he *needed* something from the other monster, had needed it for so long, but had never learned how to ask.

So instead, Sans simply closed his eyes again, ducked his head, and tried to dash the tears from his face. He fumbled for his hood, pulling it up and over his skull, the better to hide away.

Before he could find the strength to blink away again, Sans felt a warm hand close over his own, guiding him to push his hood back down. He felt Grillby's other hand come to rest against his face, gently nudging Sans' hand aside for the sake of wiping away the tears there.

Then Sans felt a fresh point of heat, blooming on his skull just over his eyesockets. It was a very *focused* point of contact, more than a touch,

more than a breath. He didn't understand what it was, until he felt Grillby's hands move to take hold of his shoulders once more, until he felt Grillby's body lean just a little more firmly against his own.

Skeletons had their own idea of what constituted physical affection, ideas that really only pertained to other skeletons. What mattered to a skeleton was the way skulls felt when pressed together, the way ribs meshed during a hug or fingerbones nestled against a spine. Papyrus was gregarious enough and bright enough in soul to be able to reach out to other sorts of monsters anyway. He'd still only even come across the idea of a kiss as something meaningful shortly after beginning his efforts to join the Royal Guard.

So it seemed especially unfair to Sans, in that moment, that *he* should be the first one to receive a first kiss.

And then a second.

And then a third.

"You will remember," he heard Grillby say, as though from very far away. *"I will help. Whatever it takes."*

This shouldn't have meant anything. Sans didn't have any lips to reciprocate with, and Grillby didn't even bother with the pretense of kissing him where a normal monster might have. But as he felt the elemental's mouth press just over one eyesocket, and then the other, Sans felt as though his very soul was starting to burn bright.

For a moment, it was too much. For a moment, all he knew was the memory of fire's hungry bite, flames licking over his bones and tearing him apart as he and his bodysnatcher screamed, of one mind at last. Sans shuddered bodily against the tree, seized for just a moment with nothing more than the wild urge to escape, to blink somewhere far away and *run*...

"Sans...?"

Yet when Sans opened his eyes again, there was only Grillby, pulling away, frowning in concern. There was only the woods, and himself, alone in his own head. He looked out at the world, and every line of it was bright and clear as a diamond. He looked up at his best friend, for lack of a better word, and couldn't imagine going back to sleep.

Grillby, meanwhile, made to pull his hands away, averting his gaze in apparent shame. *"Sans, I'm sorry,"* he stammered. *"I shouldn't have...I*

don't know..."

Sans moved faster than he had for anything in days except running away. He grabbed onto Grillby's hands and held them against his own body, staring up at the other monster without flinching. Grillby stared back at him, apparently struck speechless, his own eyes burning wider for a moment in surprise.

"don't," Sans murmured, his voice thick and hoarse with an emotion he'd never had to name before. "just..."

He felt like a monster standing over thin ice, because he'd never had to think about anything like this before. Nothing like this had ever mattered before. Sans dared to lean a little closer to Grillby, tilting his head in what he hoped counted as an invitation. "...do that again?"

Grillby blinked, and for a moment did nothing more. For a moment, Sans was seized with a cloying fear that he'd somehow lost his chance.

Finally the other monster smiled. He laughed, and Sans felt himself grinning to hear it. The expression came easily this time. In reply, Grillby leaned nearer, gathered Sans close in his arms, and kissed him all over again. Sans, meanwhile, found himself happily helpless to do anything beyond letting himself be kissed and made warm. At every brush of the other monster's mouth over his skull, Sans felt as though a flame in his soul was being fed a little higher, so that it chased away the chill of snow and despair from the inside out.

That should have still been terrifying. Yet Sans was slowly coming to realize that love was a flame. It could destroy or it could nourish. It could harm or it could heal. It was all a matter of who you trusted to tend the sparks. In this moment, Sans didn't think he could possibly have trusted Grillby more.

"jeez..." Sans' voice was a trembling, stumbling mess all over again for entirely different reasons. He gave a shaky little laugh, and was amazed that he didn't exhale a puff of smoke when doing so. "you're spoilin' me. it's not like i can, y'know. do anything like this for *you*." Head nudging suddenly seemed painfully inadequate in reciprocation for all of *this*.

"I know," Grillby murmured, without lifting his mouth away. As a result, Sans felt it when he smiled. *"That doesn't matter to me. The fact that you're here is enough. You being here has always been enough for me."*

What did he even say, to something like that? "wow." That felt almost right, so Sans tried again. "uh, *wow*. so, um, just out of curiosity...how long have you wanted to do this, anyway?"

"A while."

"seriously? i, uh, i didn't..."

"I know." Grillby did pull away, for just a moment. He stayed near enough for Sans to feel the warmth of the elemental's body. Sans missed the direct contact anyway. *"But tell me if you want to stop, and I will."*

Sans lifted his head. They both met one another's gaze without flinching. Yet again, Sans felt the future yawning before him like a vast, dark chasm. This time, however, he was able to accept that he wasn't alone in facing it. It wasn't just Grillby. It was everyone, Undyne and Alphys and the dogs and his brother. He felt warm and just for once, nothing hurt. He saw with clear eyes and a soul that was free of pain that of course they'd all wanted to help him face the idea of the future, because this was what the future looked like for *everyone*.

Sans wasn't alone. He had never been less alone, and it felt as though this was a truth that went down to his marrow.

Besides. Vast, dark chasms weren't so bad. Monsterkind as a whole had turned this one into a pretty good home, under the circumstances.

So Sans leaned forward, closing the distance between them once more. He wrapped one arm around Grillby, resting his hand against the other monster's back where vertebrae might be on any other monster. With his other hand, he gripped the collar of the truly abominable sweater, tugged Grillby down until they were properly at eye-level, and tipped his skull forward so that their foreheads nudged lightly together.

"don't you *dare*."

Grillby laughed lightly, and it sounded like twigs crackling in a campfire. So he didn't stop, at least for a little while longer. When he finally did, when they finally parted again, Sans' clothes were quite dry, and the snow around them had quite melted. That only served to remind them both that the world was still turning, and there were things to be done.

“i need to go home.”

“Yes, you do.”

Grillby straightened up and offered a hand. Sans took it without hesitation. This time, being pulled to his feet was easy. This time, his bones felt so light with the freedom from pain that Sans was giddily amazed that his feet even stayed on the ground. When he wrapped an arm around Grillby’s waist and held tight, it was for the sake of reassuring himself that he wasn’t about to float away. Grillby, meanwhile, seemed more than willing to hold him close even as they walked.

It was strange, giving and receiving so much physical affection from a monster other than his brother. But it wasn’t the bad sort of strange. They could figure it out, together.

They started off together. Fortunately, Grillby remembered that he’d left his umbrella behind before they were too far to go back and get it.

Then, each equally weary in body and equally light in soul, they walked back to town.

Chapter End Notes

> So I know this chapter was a little while in coming. But hopefully it was worth the wait! Unfortunately, the next chapter might also take a while. I'm taking a little break to recharge my emotional batteries before charging on to the end. There are still matters to be resolved, after all, and I want to make sure I do them justice and work as hard in bringing everything to a close as I did in bringing everything to this point. Look for the next chapter sometime next week or so! Thank you for reading!

The Truth

Chapter Notes

> So one week turned into almost three. Sorry about that. Hopefully this chapter makes up for it! Kind of a weirdly appropriate chapter to be publishing on Valentine's Day, at least.

Even stopping long enough to go house-to-house in Snowdin to ask if anyone had seen Sans had almost taken more willpower than even Papyrus was capable of. It was worse when it turned out no one had. Undyne hadn't called, Mettaton hadn't called. He should have called them instead, perhaps. It just felt better to keep moving. They were his friends. They would call if they had news. They would spare him this agony of uncertainty as soon as they could.

Still. It had been a very long night, and Papyrus was crossing the bridge at something less than a run when his phone rang instead. He felt his soul skip with hope and then plummet with dread, as he fumbled the phone out of his pocket. He didn't quite know what to think when he saw just who was calling him. He accepted the call anyway.

"Papyrus? Hello?"

“GRILLBY? DID YOU FIND SANS?”

“I did.”

Papyrus was suddenly so dizzy with relief that he had to stick out an arm to brace himself against the bridge’s railing. This relief was tempered with a lurching dread scant seconds later, as he asked the next obvious question: “IS HE OKAY?”

“He is.” Papyrus almost didn’t hear what Grillby said next as he slumped heavily to his knees. The force of the tension draining out of his shoulder blades had left him honestly shaky, in a way even Undyne couldn’t manage anymore. *“He’s right here with me. We’re on our way back to town now.”*

“CAN I SAY ‘HI’?”

“Of course.”

Papyrus heard the phone being passed over. He didn’t need to

breathe, but Papyrus still felt as though he was holding his breath in the moments before Sans spoke.

"papyrus?"

"SANS!" Papyrus clenched the phone tightly enough to make it creak, as though by doing so he could reach through the phone lines and hold his brother again. "GRILLBY SAYS YOU'RE OKAY! ARE YOU OKAY?" His brother *sounded* okay. He sounded remarkably okay, in fact, considering what had made him run away. If the events of the last day or so had taught Papyrus anything, however, it was that looks could be deceiving even when they didn't mean to be.

"yeah, bro. i'm okay. kinda tired, i guess? definitely too tired to take a shortcut, but that means it's, uh, it's been kind of a long walk back. kind of a long day."

Papyrus laughed. He didn't mean to laugh, and he wasn't sure it was a proper laugh. It somehow happened anyway. He pressed his free hand to his mouth to try to muffle the sound, because absolutely nothing about this was funny. It was even less funny than one of Sans' jokes.

Sans heard him anyway. His brother's tone softened.

"hey. where are you?"

"I AM AT THE BRIDGE. I WAS JUST COMING INTO THE WOODS TO LOOK FOR YOU!"

"well, you found me. stay there, okay? catch your breath. we'll come to you."

"DO YOU PROMISE?"

"…yeah, bro. promise." He heard the smile in Sans' voice. *"i'm gonna hang up now. just to make sure the phone stays with us. we'll be back soon, okay?"*

Papyrus nodded before he remembered to reply: "OKAY."

Sans hung up. Papyrus immediately called up Undyne to give her the good news. In doing so, he learned Mettaton had apparently returned from his errand, along with Alphys. The person Papyrus had asked the message to be delivered to was on their way. Papyrus asked them all to meet him back at his house, and Undyne was dragging everyone towards the boat before he'd even finished hanging up.

The skeleton made to tuck the phone back into his pocket. Then he thought better of it and simply sat down on the bridge to wait, with the phone clenched tightly in both hands.

His brother had sounded okay. Maybe Papyrus should have wondered about what had changed. For now, he intended to just sit and bask in the fact of that for a while, and worry about how to make sure it continued later.

Besides. With no one else around, he could admit to himself that he might be maybe a little tired. Better to just sit here, rest, and regain some of his prodigious strength, right? If Sans would be tired, Papyrus might need to carry him home. It wouldn't do to not be able to do that much for his brother, when Papyrus had failed to do so much else.

So Papyrus sat, and as he sat he repeated to himself that Sans was okay, that Sans had said he was okay. It hadn't even sounded like his voice hurt when he did. He was so lost in reassuring himself that it took him a second to realize he was seeing a light at the other end of the bridge, growing brighter and brighter.

The light was coming from Grillby, and Grillby had his arm around Sans. Sans, meanwhile, was walking along with the fire monster, his arm around Grillby's as well, with his head tilted to lean against his friend's shoulder. As Papyrus scrambled to his feet and dashed over to meet them, he even caught a few snippets of a conversation they hadn't yet paused.

"is that a thing i'm allowed to say now?"

"You can say whatever you like, Sans."

"see, that's not a thing you should ever say to me, but i appreciate the thought. and you are, grillby. you are very pretty."

"Thank you, Sans."

"especially your hands. you have very pretty…hey, papyrus!"

Papyrus slowed down just enough to give Sans time to step away from Grillby and hold his arms open. Then he swept his brother up into the biggest, tightest, fiercest embrace he could give, and laughed aloud when Sans returned it. "SANS! YOU'RE BACK! YOU'RE BACK AND YOU'RE OKAY AND I WAS SCARED OUT OF MY SKULL AND ARE YOU REALLY SURE YOU'RE OKAY AND..."

"i'm okay," Sans murmured, his grip tightening almost fiercely. "i'm back. and...i'm sorry i scared you."

"NEVER FEAR! ALL IS FORGIVEN! NYEH-HEH-HEH!" He shifted with every intention of properly picking Sans up to carry him home, only remember too late that this wasn't something Sans always liked anymore. But before he could apologize and set the other skeleton back on his feet, Sans shifted to be more comfortable in Papyrus' grip, like he always did. Papyrus grinned so hard his cheekbones hurt, and held him tighter before turning to face Grillby. "THANK YOU SO MUCH! I DON'T KNOW HOW I CAN POSSIBLY THANK YOU ENOUGH BUT I'LL START WITH..."

"It was no trouble," Grillby said, inclining his head to them both. Papyrus thought he saw the other monster smile. *"I'm glad I could help you both. You should take him home, now. Make sure he stays warm, he was frozen solid when I found him."*

"I WILL ABSOLUTELY DO THAT!" Sans certainly didn't feel frozen solid now - in fact, his brother felt as warm and dry as if he'd just spent a night at the restaurant, rather than out in the snow and the wind. Then again, walking arm-in-arm with a fire elemental would probably do wonders for warming you up.

Papyrus certainly appreciated even Grillby's ambient heat as the three of them walked together back into town. He was struck as they went by how this was the closest he and Sans had come to normal in so long. Sans was slumped heavily against him, drifting in and out of a peaceful doze. Papyrus was fussing at him anyway for not taking care of himself. The only difference in a scene which had otherwise played out hundreds of times before was the distance they had to go to get home, and the fact that Grillby was walking beside them rather than behind the bar cleaning glasses.

Grillby slowed his steps as they passed by the restaurant. Everyone knew he lived above it. *"Well. Here is where I leave you both. Goodnight, and take care."*

Papyrus stopped walking, curious and concerned. Sans opened his eyesockets and lifted his head. "AREN'T YOU COMING WITH US? THE LEAST I CAN DO IS MAKE YOU SOME SPAGHETTI FOR ALL YOUR HARD WORK!"

"Thank you, Papyrus. That's very kind of you to offer. But I'm afraid I'm rather tired as well." Grillby cast a wistful sort of glance up at the top

floor. *"I think it's best if I return home to rest for the night."*

"yeah. it's been a long night for all of us," Sans said. "but, uh...i'll see you around, right?"

He looked at Grillby. Grillby looked at Sans. Something passed between them, unspoken yet deep enough that Papyrus could almost feel the force of emotion resonating in Sans' soul.

Then Grillby leaned forward and kissed Sans softly on his forehead. Sans closed his eyes and smiled.

"Of course."

"cool. later, grillby."

"Good night, Sans."

He went inside. The two brothers carried on home. Silence hung between them for a few feet, before Papyrus figured out just what he wanted to say.

"SO."

"so?"

"I TAKE IT YOU AND GRILLBY...FIGURED OUT WHAT YOU WERE FIGHTING ABOUT?"

"yeah. looks like we did."

"AND NOW YOU AREN'T FIGHTING ANYMORE?"

"funny how that works out, huh?"

"WELL. WE ABSOLUTELY *MUST* HAVE HIM AROUND FOR DINNER, NOW!"

"i think i could talk him into it."

"I WILL TRUST YOU TO DO THAT, THEN. AND...SANS?"

"yeah, bro?"

"ARE YOU REALLY, REALLY SURE YOU'RE OKAY?"

They were outside their house. Papyrus paused while waiting for Sans

to answer. Sans didn't answer. At last, his patience stretched thin by a night of worrying and hoping, Papyrus bodily hoisted Sans up to eyesocket-level. "SANS!"

His brother smiled wearily.Papyrus saw the familiar shadow pass over his expression. His eyelights briefly dimmed, but at least they didn't go entirely dark. "hehehe. no secrets from you, huh, papyrus?"

"I CAN SEE RIGHT THROUGH YOU! IT'S JUST THAT...SOMETIMES I JUST NEED YOU TO TELL ME WHAT I'M SEEING."

"i get it. and...i'm feeling better, papyrus. i really think i am." *Better* was not *okay*. They both knew it was still better than not being better at all. "patching things up with grillby definitely helped out."

"SO WHAT *WERE* YOU FIGHTING ABOUT, ANYWAY? I THOUGHT KISSING WHILE YOU WERE FIGHTING ONLY HAPPENED IN ANIME!"

"it...it's a long story, papyrus. not sure i understand it all right now, either. i'll explain later, okay? i'm just really tired right now."

"OKAY." Just because he could, just because he was here to do so, Papyrus hugged Sans again and Sans hugged him back. Cowardly as it was, Papyrus found it was only right then that he could find the courage to ask what he'd wanted to all night.

"AND SANS? UM...THAT MEANS YOU WON'T RUN AWAY AGAIN...RIGHT? PLEASE?"

Sans went completely motionless in his arms. For just a second, Papyrus feared the worst.

Then his brother pulled away for the sake of pressing his forehead to Papyrus' instead. Bone knocked softly against bone. Like this, as close as they were, Papyrus could feel the way Sans' soul flared brighter with the resolve of his words.

"no more running away. ever. promise."

"OKAY. THANK YOU."

Papyrus nudged his skull against his brother's, then settled Sans more comfortably to be carried inside.

Two problems awaited them when they walked in the door, one borne

of the other. The first of those problems was the house was already occupied by Undyne, Alphys, and Mettaton. The second of those problems became apparent by the way Sans tensed in his arms, which told Papyrus his earlier plan to set his brother up on the couch as usual just wasn't going to work right now.

For all the progress of the last hour or so, he didn't want to inflict the stress of taking Sans back to his room when, for whatever reason, Sans had refused to go in there since first getting his body back.

The skeletons stared at the other monsters, who stared back. Papyrus finally broke the stalemate by nodding politely at them all, then carrying Sans across the living room and up the stairs on *his* side of the house, towards *his* room. "THANK YOU ALL FOR COMING. I WILL BE WITH YOU IN JUST A MOMENT. PLEASE HELP YOURSELVES TO FOOD."

"Thanks, Papyrus," Undyne said. "Hey, Sans."

He heard Sans mumble something against his shoulder, as Papyrus maneuvered his bedroom door open. It sounded very much like "best brother", and Papyrus felt as though his soul might have actually glowed. After all, it wasn't often nowadays that he felt certain he was doing the right thing or making the right decision.

Papyrus settled Sans onto his own bed, then left his side just long enough to retrieve most of their spare blankets from the closet. He carefully bundled Sans up in them like a particularly tired burrito, and Sans was clearly happy to let him do it.

"I WILL BE RIGHT OUTSIDE," Papyrus said, stepping back to survey his handiwork. Sans lay in a multicolored nest, almost as round as a snail with significantly less slime. His eyesockets were only half-open, his smile was content. "NO ONE ELSE WILL COME IN TO TALK TO YOU IF YOU DON'T WANT THEM TO."

"okay."

"BUT DO YOU THINK THAT, UM, YOU MAYBE MIGHT WANT DR. ALPHYS TO? JUST TO BE SAFE?"

"sure. sounds good."

"OKAY. I WILL LET HER KNOW. AND...SANS?"

"yeah, bro?"

"I'M REALLY GLAD YOU DECIDED TO COME BACK."

Sans couldn't move his arms enough to offer a hug for Papyrus. That was okay. Just from the look in his eyes as he opened them properly and looked up at his brother, Papyrus knew he would have if he could have.

"me, too, papyrus."

Papyrus left the lights on, then went back out into the living room. He told Dr. Alphys that Sans wanted to see her, and the scientist almost dropped her bag of supplies in her haste to rise up from the couch. "Okay. Um, I'll be right back. It shouldn't take long."

"Take your time, Alphys," Undyne said. "We've got all night."

"I certainly don't," Mettaton grumbled. Alphys getting up had left no one between him and Undyne, who now had an unobstructed view to glare at him. The movie star glared resentfully back.

Papyrus solved this problem by sitting himself down between them instead. "METTATON? DID YOU TALK TO THEM?"

"Of course, darling. They're on their way."

He let out a long sigh of relief. "THAT'S WONDERFUL. THANK YOU."

"What do we do until then?" Undyne asked skeptically. "I guess I have been wondering what the heck happened out there. How'd you find him, Papyrus?"

There wasn't much to say. Papyrus still told them what he could about meeting up with Grillby after getting the call. He just carefully left out why his brother and Grillby were no longer fighting. Either way, especially after the help Grillby had offered in freeing Sans from Flowey in the first place, the story seemed to satisfy Undyne.

"One thing *I'm* curious about," Mettaton said when Papyrus was done. "Is just where this supposed invitation to my cousin's house is. Blooky said he never invited your brother over to visit. He was just too polite to tell him to go away when he showed up."

"Are you calling Sans a liar?" Undyne growled, leaning around Papyrus to glare again.

"Are you calling *my cousin* a liar?!" Mettaton snapped back.

Without another word, Papyrus got up, went to his bedroom door, and knocked. When Sans and Dr. Alphys called back to him, Papyrus asked to borrow Sans' phone to check his email.

After a pause, the door was opened and Dr. Alphys was revealed on the other side. She passed the phone up to Papyrus, but he could see Sans over her head, awake and sitting up in bed. He clearly just didn't want to be seen by Mettaton or Undyne, yet. This was okay, Papyrus supposed.

"do you remember what my password is?" the smaller skeleton asked.

Papyrus frowned. "DID YOU EVER CHANGE IT WHEN YOU FIRST GOT THE PHONE, LIKE I ASKED YOU TO?"

"well..." Sans grinned sheepishly and didn't finish. He didn't need to.

"THEN YES, I REMEMBER WHAT YOUR PASSWORD IS."

"cool. bring it back when you're done."

"I WILL." He closed the door behind him, then turned back to his other two friends.

With this knowledge in mind, it was the work of a moment to unlock Sans' phone, log himself into Sans' email, and find the message in question from the day before. Papyrus even opened it up himself to read, before he passed it over to Mettaton. He wouldn't dare call such a nice ghost a liar, of course, but it really did all seem legitimate.

Once Mettaton had the phone in hand with the message in front of him, however, his brows immediately furrowed in doubt. "That's not Blooky's username," he said firmly.

"What?" Undyne asked, leaning over his shoulder to read the message. "Uh, 'Napstablook23', right? Are you sure?"

"I'm their cousin! You're their neighbor! Of *course* I'm sure. Blooky's username is *Napstablook22*. Much as I'm loathe to admit it, someone else clearly must have taken the closest username they could find, for the purposes of setting up this little charade. It might be clever, if it wasn't so *evil*. Just as well that whoever did it must be absolutely *terrible* at coming up with names of their own."

There was a ringing building up in his skull as the two other monsters bickered back and forth. Even as he sat safely between them, Papyrus'

soul was starting to feel cold. He wasn't sure he knew why. He was afraid he did.

"METTATON? MAY I PLEASE SEE THE MESSAGES YOU THINK SANS SENT TO YOU?"

"Are you sure, Papyrus?" Undyne asked, immediately reaching out to rest a hand on his shoulder. "They're, uh...they're pretty bad."

"THANK YOU, UNDYNE. I AM SURE."

Mettaton pulled out his phone, brought up the messages, then passed it over to Papyrus. Mercifully, he didn't argue the point about who the messages had originated from again. It was likely he knew the answer already, just as Papyrus was afraid he himself did.

He didn't look at the message's contents. He didn't need to. He just looked at the "Sent" field, and he was certain.

"THAT ISN'T SANS' USERNAME."

"Let me guess," Mettaton said, leaning back heavily against the couch with a sigh. "It's one number off?"

"SANS IS 'SLIGHTLYLESSCOOLSKELETON94'. THIS IS FROM 'SLIGHTLYLESSCOOLSKELETON93'. WHOEVER DID THIS IS, UM...VERY BAD AT NAMES, YES."

Undyne swore violently enough that Papyrus was faintly surprised the air did not, in fact, turn blue. "Son of a...well, what do we do? Is punching someone into a fine paste an option? Because I'm *really* feeling like punching someone into a fine paste."

His hands were shaking around the phone. Papyrus carefully passed it back to Mettaton, before he dropped it or something. The robot took it without comment, and with a look in his eyes that might have been concern. It meant a great deal to Papyrus in that moment, and only made him more certain of what he had to do. Sans wasn't the only one who had been wronged, here.

This couldn't go on.

"UNDYNE? WILL YOU PLEASE KEEP AN EYE ON SANS?"

"Uh...sure? Duh? But you say that like you aren't going to be here to keep an eye on Sans."

"I NEED TO GO OUT."

"Why?"

"I CAN'T TELL YOU. IF I TELL YOU, YOU'LL TRY TO TALK ME OUT OF IT."

Undyne snorted, folding her arms to regard him skeptically. "Papyrus, this is *me* you're talking to."

"I KNOW."

It took her a second to understand. Then Undyne actually drew back a little in alarm. "Oh. *Okay*, then." Being Undyne, however, she of course recovered quickly, leaning in towards Papyrus enough to insist. "So that's just even more reason why I need to come with you! Or, y'know, possibly lock you up in the closet until you come to your senses."

"PLEASE, UNDYNE. I TRUST YOU TO LOOK AFTER SANS. METTATON HAS ALREADY DONE ENOUGH!"

"Really? Because considering he *started* all of this..."

"I'm *here* now, and I'll thank you to..."

The sound of the bedroom door opening and closing proved loud enough to cut through all their raised voices. Papyrus realized this was because they must have all been listening for it.

Alphys stood there at the top of the stairs, both hands clenched tightly around her clipboard, regarding them anxiously from over the top of it.

"Um...hi?"

"Alphys," said Undyne, immediately shifting into a stance which was something less than hostile. "What's the verdict?"

The scientist smiled, and Papyrus felt as if everyone in the room must have let out a sigh of relief. The sudden loss of tension in the air between them all left him feeling a little dizzy.

"He's okay," Alphys said. "Grillby did a really good job warming him up, and...and he's in a good mood. Better than I've seen him in a while. His soul is really doing well. Actually, um..." Here an undeniably red tint became visible in her cheeks. The clipboard rattled

a little with Alphys' apparent efforts to hold it in place, rather than bringing it up over her face again. "...Undyne? C-Can I t-t-talk to you for a m-minute?"

"W-What?" Now Undyne was blushing as well. She looked back and forth from Mettaton to Papyrus, clearly seeking aid which was not forthcoming. "Oh, I mean, of...course you can, Alphys, I just thought...Papyrus! *Hey! Get back here!*"

He felt her make a grab for him, close but not close enough. Papyrus didn't wait to see what else she might do. The instant he'd been sure that Undyne's attention was well and truly on Alphys, he'd made a break for the door.

Expecting at any second to be pulled back, Papyrus wrenched the door open and then raced back out into the snow. He heard her race after him, heard her calling for him to stop, but the pursuit didn't extend much beyond a few paces from the front door.

Thd told him that she understood, in the end.

Papyrus was grateful.

* * *

Sans was sleepy.

There were doubtless people he needed to talk to and explanations he needed to give. Fortunately, the fact that he'd been bundled up and left safely in here told Sans it would be okay if he didn't think about the future just yet. Besides, it was easy to feel sleepy in here. This was *Papyrus*' room, familiar as anything in Sans' life. The bed was also surprisingly comfortable. It was a little too small for his brother, had been for years, which meant Sans felt quite snug and cozy surrounded by the race car's walls while bundled up in blankets.

This meant that, when Alphys asked him to unbundle himself so she could take a proper look at him, Sans felt entitled to a certain amount of grumbling. He unbundled himself anyway, then sat patiently while she conducted a makeshift exam with what tools she'd brought with her.

After a while, Sans was sure he must have fallen asleep accidentally anyway, or else started hallucinating. The only other alternative was that Alphys was really *smiling* at whatever results she was seeing, as she finished up some calculations at the bottom of the page.

"so, uh, doc?" Sans said, scratching thoughtfully at his skull. "about that piano?"

Alphys looked up at him in blank surprise. "Piano? Um, what piano?"

Sans motioned for her to carry on. "i mean, what's the verdict?"

"Oh." Then it happened again. She smiled again. "Sans, um, if it's okay, if you don't mind my asking...what happened to you, out there in the woods?"

"huh?"

"Your HP levels were really worrying just a couple of days ago. Now...well, *something* must have happened, right? Papyrus and Undyne were afraid you'd be dust by the time someone found you, but here you are."

"uh..." Where did he even begin? How did he even begin? *Why* should he even begin? Just the thought of trying made his teeth feel as though they were stuck together.

"Oh my god." Alphys clapped a hand over her mouth. It wasn't enough to disguise the glee in her voice. "I didn't know skeletons could *blush*!"

Sans promptly tugged an edge of the nearest blanket up and over his head. Laughing and trying not to, Alphys reached over to try to tug it back down. Sans made her work for it, but eventually let her.

"Sans, I'm sorry. I mean, I really am. It's just, um..." Here Alphys took a deep breath, before managing to compose herself. "A change this drastic...I really need to know what might have happened. To make sure that it doesn't undo itself."

Undo. What a simple word. Yet his soul throbbed with pain at what it might mean. The thought of all of that, of warmth and smiles and safety, being taken away or lost...well, it was that very same fear which had always stopped him from reaching out in the first place, wasn't it? It was that very same fear with regards to so many things which had shaped Sans' behavior all while the resets were going on.

Alphys must have recognized the look on his face, because she took pity. "Does it have to do with what we talked about before? About food and, um, things related to food?"

"yeah. so, uh--"

He was cut off by a knock on the door. After Sans gave her a meaningful look, Alphys went over to answer it. It was Papyrus, asking to borrow Sans' phone. Too tired to wonder why or to care, Sans passed it over. Papyrus left without explanation, and Sans stared at the door pensively before he was drawn back to reality by Alphys clearing her throat.

"so, uh, yeah. you know grillby, right?"

"Of course. Everybody does. I think he even used to live in Hotland, with his sister and her daughter."

"sounds about right. anyway, we've been friends for kind of a long time. his food's really great, and he's really great, and i always used to go there to just...hang out with people. mostly hang out with him, though. then, um...after flowey got a hold of me, i hurt him. about as badly as you can hurt a monster like him."

"It wasn't you, Sans."

"i grabbed the pot. i threw the water. didn't want to do it. still did. flowey might have made me. i still hurt him. i still have those memories rattling around in my skull. hehehe. guess he got his payback, though." Sans gestured at his face. The burns had definitely healed. He'd caught a look at himself in the ice path on the way home. He still doubted the bone would ever look entirely undamaged again. The shadows would remain.

Alphys, meanwhile, looked almost offended at what Sans was saying. "It wasn't *like* that, I know he didn't mean it that way! We--"

"i get it, alphys. i know you didn't. you've gotta admit, though, the world has a weird sense of humor sometimes, doesn't it? i mess up grillby's face, and he has to mess up mine to save me. hehehehe. what a world, huh?"

"Yeah. What a world."

Alphys looked miserable at the thought, however. Sans was therefore moved to answer what had been her real question from the start.

"so, uh, after all of that...guess i was afraid i'd lost out on my oldest friend. he couldn't even look at me for the longest time. hell, who could, after what i did to him and he did to me? he still came looking for me tonight. we talked, or...well, i guess he did most of the talking.

and..."

"And?"

"...he kissed me. a lot. turns out it was pretty great."

Alphys let out a piercing squeal, clapping both hands to her cheeks in apparent bliss. "Oooh! That sounds just like the end of season one of *Blueberry Desperation*! A passionate confession in the dark! The purity of requited love against the purity of new snowfall! A kiss..."

"uh, alphys?"

She got herself back under control with visible effort. Even then, she was still smiling warmly at him. "I mean...I'm really happy for you, Sans. Besides, um, I think that might even answer my question."

"about my soul?"

"and, more specifically, about your hp. here."

She passed over the paper she'd been writing on. Yet again, Sans found himself staring at a number, circled several times for certainty.

He didn't know what he'd been expecting. His expression fell. "this is supposed to be good news?"

"Huh?"

"i'm back down to half a point again?" He jabbed a finger at her result. It read *1/2*, clear as anything.

"Half a...oh. *Oh.*" Alphys hastily took the paper back and scribbled something else out. "No, no, that's not what I meant! Read it like this!"

She passed it back. Sans took it, stared at it, and then kept staring as he realized what he was seeing.

Current HP levels: 1

Maximum HP levels: 2

"no way."

"Obviously, I'd like you to come back down to the lab anyway when you're feeling better. Just so I can, um, make sure. But yes way, Sans."

"and...and you think *this* has something to do with...us?"

"It sounds like you and Grillby might have felt this way about each other for a long time, even if you never said anything. That sort of...*restraint* placed on your emotions can cause a lot of stress to your soul, Sans. We're really not meant to live that way. Monsters are mostly magic and emotion as it is."

"seriously?"

"Yep."

"no, i mean...*seriously*? *you* are telling me to be honest with my feelings?"

"W-Well..."

"wonder how much hp you've been missing out on, keeping quiet around undyne."

"It d-doesn't matter! Even I have more HP than you do! So it doesn't matter if I maybe miss out on a few." She pulled her clipboard up in front of her face, so Sans almost didn't hear her mumble: "It's not like I'm meant to live like most monsters anyway. B-But there's no reason you shouldn't be happy."

"why do you think you aren't, alphys?"

"It's complicated."

"that's the thing about undyne. she's *really* good at complicated."

Alphys did not look remotely convinced, or at least she didn't lower the clipboard. Sans took pity. With a sigh, he tried a different tactic.

"look. i'm not saying things magically get better when you're honest about these kind of things. they don't. grillby and i...we're gonna have a lot to talk about. you know me, alphys - i *hate* long talks. so does he. so does undyne. i guess what i'm saying is...things get *different*. and...sometimes that's better. at least you know, no matter what, they won't just be different for you."

Sans grew bolder as he talked, mostly because Alphys was lowering the clipboard the longer he talked, until she could peer anxiously at him over the top of it. This had to be a good sign.

She mumbled something.

"didn't quite catch that, alphys."

"She'll hate me. If...if she knows the truth...I'd rather we just be friends than have her hate m-me..."

This gave Sans pause. He knew she was wrong, of course. It was just a matter of how best to say as much.

"if you really think so...and for the record, i disagree on every possible level, but if you really think so...then, don't you owe her that chance?"

"I guess." Alphys squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, then nodded fiercely. The blush in her cheeks had darkened noticeably. "No. I mean...I *know*. It's just that, Sans, is this really the best time?"

"of course not. i just got my first kiss from my maybe-boyfriend after i ran away from home. there *is* no best time."

Alphys laughed, then immediately covered her snout with her hands, looking guilty. "I guess not. And, um...that seemed to work out pretty well for you, right?"

"you've got the numbers to prove it."

"I do. And, and you're right. I know you're right." She had to take several deep breaths thie time, nodding as though to reassure herself. "I'm gonna do it, Sans."

"what are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna tell Undyne how I feel!"

"well, she's not in here to tell."

"Oh! Um, right!" Alphys scrambled to her feet before turning to face the door, keeping a white-knuckled grip on her clipboard. She started forward, caught herself, looked back at Sans. "Are...are you going to be okay in here by yourself?"

Sans nodded reassuringly. "nowhere i'd be more okay, alphys. i'll probably just grab a nap. you go get 'em."

She went. Sans heard a lot of shouting coming from outside when she opened the door. It was muffled when she closed it again, just not quite enough for him to miss the sound of a door slamming just a moment later.

Alphys had probably lost her nerve. Or maybe she had, and she and Undyne had run off somewhere together.

Either way, as Sans got up from the bed and went to log himself into Papyrus' computer, he didn't think much of it.

* * *

He'd run halfway across the Underground already today. He'd almost run as much as he had when leading Flowey along on their little chase, and it looked as though he had a while still to go. Yet Papyrus didn't feel tired, not anymore. His strides ate up the distance almost without him noticing. He didn't even feel very cold.

This wasn't determination. Only humans could be determined. It was still resolution, of a sort. Now he knew what he hadn't before, now he saw what had been hidden from him. Someone had been working to kill Sans just a little every day even as they all came together to piece him together. Now Papyrus knew who, and even as his soul felt sick with horror *he would make it stop.*

"FLOWEY!" Papyrus called, as he left the buildings behind for the dark, bare trees. "FLOWEY, I KNOW YOU'RE OUT HERE! I NEED TO TALK TO YOU, RIGHT NOW! *FLOWEY*!"

A few of the teenagers came out onto the path to ask him what he was doing, if he was okay, if they could help. With as much force of will as he could muster as Captain of the Royal Guard, Papyrus told them all to go home. Some of them even listened.

He ran on, and kept calling. And rather than trying to leave his thoughts and doubts behind, Papyrus carried them with him on his back, and took the time before he received an answer to look back over them all. After years of training with Undyne, a little thing like walking and reflecting at the same time was simple enough to not even register as an effort. He thought of what he hadn't seen, or what he had seen and had simply written off as not very important or only to be expected. Feelings hurt when Sans wasn't even there, tempers stirred so that his brother would get caught up in them at the wrong time. It all spun back around to one tiny golden flower.

It all made sense now. That, at least, was a relief beyond words.

"FLOWEY! FLOWEY, I ONLY WANT TO TALK! PLEASE, COME OUT!"

It felt as though he must have searched for hours, until at last, he

found himself looking up to see the giant doors of the Ruins, still standing open. The shadows in the cave beyond seemed very dark and deep.

He'd woken up outside these very doors, back at the start. He'd woken up only with the sense that something very bad had happened, a sense which had been reinforced at the sight of his brother's footprints in the snow, heading into the Ruins. Papyrus had followed him and found him and...

'Hi there. I'm your best friend.'

Papyrus wrapped his arms around himself, trying not to shudder. The woods suddenly seemed a good deal colder now. He didn't want to go back in there.

Yet he couldn't stop. His brother was finally safe. Papyrus knew he had to do anything to keep him that way. He would go as far as he had to. So the skeleton drew himself up to his full height, clenched his fists at his side, set his jaw in a tight line, and started to walk inside.

Then a voice spoke up cheerfully from behind him.

"Oh, hey, Papyrus! Were you looking for me? Golly, I hope I didn't keep you waiting. Hee hee hee..."

All the Little Pieces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Looking back, it was obvious. If Flowey hadn't been quite so adept at piling one thing on top of another, Sans had to believe that he would have seen the truth of the matter back at Napstablook's house.

Right now, he could at least do his best to work through that humiliation by going online and going digging. Sans sat in Papyrus' desk chair, blankets piled around his shoulders and lap, and went digging.

He saw no point in hiding matters now. That would only give Flowey more places to hide, and Sans was better at making friends than the evil little flower ever would be. He went on to some of his usual boards and posted the most straightforward message he could bring himself to type.

hey guys. turns out someones been pretending 2 be me these last few days/ weeks. online and off. if you got any weird messages from someone like that, let me know? thx.

Then he clicked around on some joke sites until reply notifications started coming in.

It was both better and worse than he'd thought. Worse because Flowey had apparently been messing with a lot of monsters that Sans hadn't even had the energy to *think* about checking in with. Better because they all leaped on the offered explanation for his sudden, uncharacteristic cruelty. Vulkin even sent him a virtual hug. Whimsalot commended his bravery in coming forward. Madjick hadn't even noticed that anything was wrong, but it was always butting into conversations that had nothing to do with it anyway.

Those who chimed in with disbelief were assured by others that Sans' words were true – he saw support from Woshua, Dogamy, and Dogaressa. Doggo even dug up the offending fake account and said he'd go ahead and take the lead in getting it closed.

The highlight of it all was getting a very hesitant private message from Moldbygg, apologizing for running away earlier. Apparently, Flowey had stopped by to give it a hard time just the day before Papyrus had

brought him to Waterfall, and especially not knowing what else had happened, the slime monster had been feeling rather on edge.

Sans replied back that it was all good now, because it was.

He was so absorbed in his own success and the words of support that when a knock on the door sounded, Sans flinched violently enough to almost knock the mouse to the floor.

“who's there?" he called without looking around.

He thought he heard the sound of muffled laughter from beyond. *“A broken pencil!”*

Sans did look around then. He looked and *stared*.

Then he gasped as realization dawned and tried to get up from the chair so fast that he fell out of it. It took him a second to untangle himself from the blankets, and then Sans hurried to the door. He managed to catch himself at the last possible second before opening it.

He had to bite down on a knucklebone for a second, just to keep from chuckling with anticipation. “a broken pencil who?”

“Oh, nevermind! It’s pointless*!”*

Sans burst out laughing, hard enough to double over and need a minute to catch his breath. From outside, the newcomer was also obviously enjoying a good laugh at her own joke – and rightly so.

Then he opened the door, and found himself looking up at the Queen of the Underground.

“Hello, Sans!” said Toriel happily, stepping aside to let him out. “I am so sorry I’m late!”

“late?” asked Sans, stepping out into the rest of the house with her. “i, uh…i didn’t know you were coming.”

Looking around, he saw that the living room was otherwise empty – no Mettaton, Alphys, Undyne, or Papyrus. That was worrying, to say the least.

“Didn’t you?” Toriel asked. She turned away to close the bedroom door. “That’s odd. Papyrus told Mettaton to tell me that you were in trouble, and that all your friends should come and see you!”

Sans stopped on the last step, staring at nothing.

His brother had sent a message to the *Queen of the Underground*, asking her to come and visit to help cheer Sans up.

That sounded about right.

“hey, uh, where is papyrus, anyway?”

“He was already gone when I got here. Undyne didn’t say where. She and Alphys are right outside – it looks like they had a lot to talk about. Mettaton said he had some things in Waterfall to take care of.”

So Mettaton had gone back to visit Napstablook. Undyne and Alphys were taking some time alone to hopefully discuss only good things about Alphys’ little confession. Indeed, now that he took a proper look around, Sans could see a pair of familiar shadows moving just outside one of the windows.

And Papyrus was not here.

“Papyrus didn’t even tell you where he was going?” Toriel asked, seeing the look on his face and frowning in equal concern. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“no,” said Sans. “it really doesn’t.”

Now that he took a proper look around, Sans could see that his phone had been left on the coffee table. He went to get it, Toriel following him.

“so, just out of curiosity, how much did papyrus tell you about the ‘trouble’ I was in?”

“Not very much. He said it was complicated, and that he would tell me when I got here. I am sorry for being late, Sans.”

She sounded it. Sans hadn’t been upset from the start, of course, but he took an extra bit of pity at the sound. “it’s cool. you are the queen again. i gotta figure queens are pretty busy.” Papyrus was not here. Papyrus had specifically invited someone over, told them he would be here, and was not here. Something was *definitely* wrong, and it was this growing wave of concern that kept Sans from stopping himself as he carried on: “even asgore had a few sleepless nights just keeping those flowers...”

“I am certain that he did.”

Just the fact that Toriel had cut him off told Sans that he’d stepped out of line. He looked up at his old friend with an apologetic frown.

“…sorry.”

Toriel visibly had to take a moment to compose herself. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, before smiling gently at Sans when she opened them again.

“I am the Queen, but you are still my friend, Sans.” She gathered his hands up in both of hers’, squeezing gently. “Of course I would try to see you if you weren’t feeling well.”

“thanks. means a lot.” It really did, and he hoped the smile he offered her in turn conveyed as much.

“You have not been by for work in some time, so I have missed you. Perhaps in the future, when you are not feeling well enough, Papyrus could bring you by for some pie instead!”

“that’d be great. though, uh, you do know my job is basically just to sit in that hallway and make sure jerry doesn’t come and bug you, right?”

“I do. And I appreciate it very much, Sans.”

“Jerry’s gotten in to see you since I’ve been laid up, hasn’t he?”

Her brow twitched, though her smile never wavered. “He is a very interesting monster. But perhaps, when you come back, you could help him think of other things to do.”

“i got your back, tori.”

But the phone was still in his hand, its weight and the promise of answers impossible to ignore. Sans pulled his hands back, gave Toriel a thumbs-up, and then went to unlock it.

Papyrus hadn’t canceled out of whatever screen he’d been looking at when he’d run off. Papyrus had been looking at the invitation to Napstablook’s house.

Papyrus could sometimes find difficulty in interesting places. He was still far from stupid.

The front door burst open. Sans whirled around to face it, only stopping himself at the very last minute from turning the intruder's soul blue. This was just as well, because it was Undyne standing there, one hand still braced on the door. The other was clenched tight around her phone.

"Sans," she said. "Thank goodness. I thought I saw you up."

"i'm up. what's going on? where's papyrus?"

"I don't know." The look on his face when she admitted that much made Undyne actually draw back. "I *don't.* He wouldn't say, and I…I didn't know what he was doing, so I thought maybe he just needed to take a walk! But he's been gone a while, and I've been trying to call him. He's not picking up. And you know him, Sans. No matter what time you call him on the phone…night, day, afternoon, morning…"

"he always answers in the first two rings," Sans finished quietly. He looked at Undyne, looked at the phone, and then looked back up at the former guard captain. "i think i know where he is."

He started for the door, then was surprised to feel himself held back by a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Sans, wait!" said Toriel. "You still don't look well – let me come with you!"

"that's nice of you to offer," Sans replied hastily, his gaze still fixed on the door, the outside, the way to his brother. "but, uh, i was just gonna take a shortcut from here. not sure if i'm up to bringing both of us." It was a tempting offer, he was feeling better after some rest, and according to Alphys he was even back up to his old standard of normal. Sans still wasn't sure he could transport Toriel with him on a jump of this distance.

When she picked him up and bodily turned him around to face her, Sans was too startled to pull away. He simply stared blankly up at her as she closed her eyes and let out a low hum.

In the next instant, his soul felt flooded with warmth, and Sans felt his HP total rise above one for the first time in longer than he could remember.

He grinned to realize it. When she set him down, he took her hand. "*now* i'm sure. c'mon, tori."

"Right behind you, Sans!"

“You guys aren’t going *anywhere* without me!” Undyne cried, looking as though she was seriously considering moving to block their way. “I am *not* waiting here while he’s out there!”

“then do me a favor and swing by grillby’s. make sure he’s still okay, too. i don’t care how much hp i have now, i can’t carry all three of us. and, uh, no offense, undyne. but tori still outranks you.” Toriel was also stronger than her, and they all knew it.

Undyne didn’t look happy, but she looked marginally less unhappy with a way to help in front of her. She just stepped over to stand in front of Sans, reaching out to rest a hand on top of his skull.

“Hey. You’d better come back, you hear me?”

“i hear ya.”

“And it had better be you coming back, got it?”

“loud and clear. that’s the plan.”

“Okay, then.” She gave him a firm shove towards the door. “Go get him, loser.”

Holding Toriel’s hand in his, Sans went to go get him. They hurried out the front door, past a decidedly dazed and dreamily smiling Alphys, and took a shortcut from there.

* * *

The phone was a smoking wreck in the snow. Papyrus stared at it, nursing his injured hand against his ribcage, as Flowey withdrew the creeper he’d used to swat it out of Papyrus’ hand. A few magic bullets had made short work of the keypad and screen before it had even hit the ground.

“There,” said Flowey primly. “Let that be a lesson, Papyrus. Taking phonecalls when someone is trying to talk to you is *rude*.”

“I REALLY DID COME TO TALK TO YOU! UNDYNE IS PROBABLY JUST WORRIED ABOUT ME!” And now she was going to come looking, and maybe she would get hurt, too. The thought made Papyrus’ soul feel as though it was caught in a vice.

A vice that Flowey twisted just a little tighter. “Or maybe Sans is wondering just where his supercool brother is gone, and why you

aren't there to protect him like you promised?"

Papyrus clenched his hands hard enough to hurt. Yet he also felt his soul burning a little brighter, as Flowey reminded him of his real purpose in coming here. "I *AM* PROTECTING HIM, EVEN IF I AM NOT THERE! I HAVE COME TO ASK YOU WHY *YOU* ARE STILL SO DETERMINED TO HURT MY BROTHER!"

"Oh? What makes you think Sans being a hot mess is *my* fault?"

"PLEASE DO NOT LIE TO ME, FLOWEY! I KNOW WHAT YOU'VE BEEN DOING, NOW. YOU MADE METTATON THINK SANS WAS GOING TO HURT THAT NICE GHOST! YOU'VE TOLD OTHER MONSTERS THAT THEY SHOULD STILL BE AFRAID OF HIM! YOU MADE HIM FIGHT WITH HIS BEST FRIEND!" Flowey had made it so that Sans shuddered and whimpered in his sleep, and that sometimes Sans' eyesockets went dark when the bad memories became just too much. He'd made it so Sans sometimes hid his face like he was trying not to scare other people. "YOU'VE BEEN WORKING SO HARD JUST TO MAKE MY BROTHER MISERABLE!"

Flowey made Sans run away to try and *die*.

Papyrus couldn't possibly imagine hating someone so much. He certainly couldn't imagine someone he'd once considered a friend feeling that way. It made him feel sick and cold to try. Nevertheless, he could no longer ignore the evidence in front of him that Flowey did indeed hate Sans that much.

He couldn't let it go on.

"AND I'VE COME TO DO WHAT I SHOULD HAVE DONE A BETTER JOB DOING BEFORE!" He set his fists at his sides, squared his shoulders, tightened his jaw. "I'VE COME TO GET YOU TO *STOP*!"

"Really?" Flowey asked sweetly, folding his leaves under his face and smiling broadly. "And how are you going to do that, Papyrus?" He kept smiling, wider and wider, until the expression seemed to twist his face and sharp teeth gleamed in the weak light of the woods. "Are you going to *kill* me, Papyrus? Because that's the only way Sans is *ever* going to be safe from me!"

Papyrus *had* been prepared to hurt Flowey, if it would keep him away from Sans. He didn't like fighting. He didn't like hurting people. But he liked what had been done to his brother even less.

Of course, he didn't know how much HP Flowey had. He couldn't see it. Flowey didn't even have a soul that could be turned blue. But when the human had been here, Papyrus had been able to stop himself before killing them. He'd only been training harder since then. He had to believe it wouldn't have to go that far, or else his hands would be shaking too badly to attack. Maybe if Flowey believed he would, Papyrus could scare him away before he had to admit that much.

He made himself think of Sans. Papyrus remembered him as a sobbing wreck on the floor of the bathroom, so overcome with misery and shame that he was trying to tear himself to pieces.

Papyrus remembered him arm-in-arm with Grillby, looking at peace at last.

Then he darted forward with a wild cry, and sent a line of blue and white bones arrowing through the air at the little yellow flower. Flowey's eyes went wide in almost comical surprise, and he quickly vanished back down into the snow. Papyrus pivoted on the spot. His gaze scanned the ground around him all in a second. When he saw the snow start to roil just a couple of feet to his right, he set a line of blue bones stabbing down just as Flowey popped up.

Papyrus bit back a wince as the flower yelped in pain, but it made him hesitate for only a moment. Flowey sent a torrent of magic bullets at him. Papyrus deflected most of them with a bone the size of a staff that he summoned into his hand with a thought, and made vanish as soon as he was safe. The ones that got through and bit into his soul caused a pain that left him breathless. It still didn't make him falter.

It was a long, slow battle. Flowey was unable to do much damage, though the sheer magnitude of his hostile intentions made up for the weakness in his attack. Papyrus was unwilling to do much damage, lest he go too far and take his former friend's life. They were both good at dodging. They both had to be. No one could dodge forever, though, and Papyrus felt his HP being whittled down little by little. Even if he couldn't sense Flowey's soul, he could still sense that Flowey's HP was also being brought down bit by bit as well. Papyrus was only doing 1 HP worth of damage per attack by that point. But he could also conjure up a great many attacks, even as his eyesockets burned and his vision blurred with the threat of tears.

There was a bad moment, as he ducked and spun through a torrent of magic bullets, as he hopped and dodged over vines that stabbed up from the ground to catch and trip him. There was a bad moment

where Papyrus hated Flowey, and knew that he hated him. Even the hot, piercing rush of hate for himself for feeling that way was better than that. How could he *stop* himself from crying, in the thick of that?

He still fought on anyway. For Sans. *This was for Sans.*

At last, Flowey was caught in a circle of bones, each one ready to stab in and through him, and Papyrus could tell that he didn't have the HP to survive it. The circle was too tight to let him escape through the snow, and there was nowhere else to hide. The little flower's petals were ragged and torn, his eyes were wide and terrified and shining with tears.

"Okay!" Flowey cried, holding up his leaves in a gesture of peace. "Okay, I'm s-sorry! I understand now! Please, Papyrus, please just don't hurt me anymore!"

Papyrus' own HP had been reduced by maybe half, but the sheer relief he felt at Flowey's words was as good as one of the queen's pies. It was coupled with no small amount of shame to see someone he had once considered a friend looking at him like that.

At least now, he could stop. Maybe Flowey really would listen now, rather than making either of them go through that again.

Papyrus took the chance to scrub a hand over his face, dashing the tears away and just trying to catch his breath. Once he was sure he could speak without sobbing, however, he did.

"I AM VERY SORRY I DID THAT, FLOWEY. AND I AM NOT GOING TO HURT YOU ANYMORE. BUT…PLEASE, I JUST NEED YOU TO STAY HERE AND LISTEN TO ME FOR A MINUTE. WILL YOU DO THAT? FOR…FOR AN OLD FRIEND'S SAKE?"

Cowering and trembling hard enough to rustle, staring up at him in shock, Flowey nevertheless managed a tiny nod. Without hesitating for another second, Papyrus dismissed Flowey's prison with a wave of his hand, and was heartened when the other monster seemed to settle a little more firmly into the snow but did not retreat.

"You're..." the flower stammered, apparently in disbelief. "You're...really not going to kill me?"

"NO. I DON'T BELIEVE THAT IS THE ONLY WAY TO FIX THIS. I DON'T BELIEVE YOU WANT THAT TO BE THE ONLY WAY TO FIX THIS." He spread his arms wide in a gesture of peace, mustering up a

hopeful smile. "FLOWEY...HOW SCARED YOU FELT JUST NOW, THAT'S HOW SCARED MY BROTHER HAS BEEN EVERY DAY! YOU SEE NOW HOW WRONG THAT IS, DON'T YOU? DID ALL OF THIS REALLY START JUST BECAUSE YOU WANTED A BODY OF YOUR OWN?"

Flowey nodded, just once, and Papyrus carried on doggedly. "I WISH YOU HAD ASKED ME FOR HELP! DR. ALPHYS IS VERY SMART! I'M SURE SHE COULD HAVE MADE LEGS FOR YOU OR SOMETHING!"

"You..."

"I'M SURE SHE COULD EVEN STILL DO THAT! ANYTHING SO THAT YOU DIDN'T FEEL LIKE YOU HAD TO HURT PEOPLE!"

"You..."

"I WISH WE COULD STILL BE FRIENDS, FLOWEY." Even if Flowey saw the truth now, Papyrus couldn't stomach the idea of being friends with someone who had caused his brother so much pain. He couldn't get those memories out of his head. He didn't want to, because he had to be there for Sans. All the same, that didn't make what Papyrus said next any less true: "I STILL HOPE YOU HAVE A GOOD LIFE FROM HERE ON. I HOPE YOU LEARN THESE IMPORTANT LESSONS ON YOUR OWN, EVEN WITHOUT MY EXPERT GUIDANCE."

There. All the important words were out and said. Papyrus let out a long sigh of relief, and braced himself to turn and go. Nevertheless, he found himself hesitating a moment longer, staring down at Flowey intensely, searching his former friend's face for any sign that his words had been truly heard and understood.

Then the little flower smiled, and in that smile, Papyrus saw that he had made a very big mistake.

“You…***idiot!***”

Papyrus felt his feet yanked forcibly out from under him, and he went down hard on his back in the snow. He pushed himself up onto his elbows to see that vines and creepers had wrapped themselves so thickly around his feet while he'd been talking that he almost couldn't see his boots.

Immediately, he heaved himself upright to try to tear and slash them free. Before he was even halfway through with that, danger instincts honed from countless training sessions warned Papyrus of the

oncoming attack. He twisted right, and the vine that had been aimed at his face stabbed down into the snow hard enough to send up a powdery spray. He twisted left to dodge the attack that followed it, and realized too late that Flowey had been waiting for him to do just that. Another vine leapt up out of the snow and lashed around his wrist.

Papyrus tried to summon bones up out of the ground to tear through his bonds. The flicker of concentration it took to get them to start to take form almost got him stabbed through the ribcage. He twisted further to the left because it was the only way he could go, and wasn't even surprised when Flowey responded by closing the trap even tighter, binding his other wrist.

The entire thing couldn't have taken more than ten seconds. The end result was Papyrus, slumped and bound on his side in the snow, panting for breath. The end result was Flowey, cackling with malicious glee.

"Did you really think that *asking nicely* was going to make me stop? Didn't you learn your lesson *last time*?" Flowey ducked briefly down beneath the snow. When he appeared again, it was right in front of Papyrus' gaze, next to his restrained hands. "No matter how sweetly a toy begs for mercy, ***that doesn't change the fact that it's a toy!*** If you want to blame anyone for that, blame the human! *They* were supposed to come back and fix everything! But they left you behind, they left you to *me*! And I'm just making the best of it."

There was so much that was horrible happening and being said in such quick succession. Somehow, in the midst of all of it, Papyrus found himself zeroing in on two words and one detail.

"...'LAST TIME'?"

Flowey's jaw dropped. He stared at Papyrus for a long, breathless moment, head slightly tilted. Then he laughed, long and loud and hard enough to make his tattered petals shake and his leaves wave in the air, hard enough that Papyrus could feel the vines around him flex and writhe a little.

"Oh, wow. Oh, *wow*. You really *don't* remember, do you? I thought Sans was just *deluding* himself when he said you wouldn't!"

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT!" Papyrus insisted, a little more loudly and a little more heatedly than he'd initially intended.

Flowey leaned forward, until he was eye-to-eyesocket with his skeleton captive. Papyrus tried to lean back, but there wasn't enough give in his restraints.

"Tell me, Papyrus," Flowey cooed, folding his leaves under his head. "Didn't you ever wonder just *how* I was able to get a hold of Sans? He hates me just as much as I hate him, after all. Why would he *ever* let me close enough to hang on? Not like *you*. Not like my *best friend*."

On some rational level, Papyrus knew what Flowey was implying. Yet he couldn't make himself believe it, he couldn't *let* himself believe it. If what Flowey was saying was true, then...then it was a truth too horrible to be borne.

Even so, if he cast his mind back, all Papyrus could remember of the start of this nightmare was waking up here, outside the Ruins, with only a trail of Sans' footprints as a sign that something else had happened.

"NO...!"

"Heeheeh*eeheehee**hee!*** Poor, poor Papyrus. All this time, you've been thinking you were the hero of this little story, when in fact ***you were the cause!***"

It couldn't be true, it had to be a lie, and yet Papyrus couldn't remember, he couldn't remember how it had started, he *couldn't* be responsible but he…

"This is already going *so much better* than last time! You were making *so much more noise*, last time! 'Flowey, we're friends! Can't we talk this out? There must be another way' and blah, blah, blah until I finally had to strap your big mouth shut!"

Again with the mention of "last time". Now the words had an even more immediate, even worse implication. It was going to happen again, Flowey was going to take control of him and use him to hurt Sans and he couldn't let that happen, *wouldn't* let that happen…

Flowey's vines were getting tighter around him. Papyrus redoubled his efforts to escape, even tried flaring his soul brighter in the hope that it would push Flowey back. He remembered too late that there was nothing there to push. He couldn't see Flowey's HP because he couldn't see Flowey's soul because *there was nothing there.*

This wasn't like training with Undyne, this wasn't like training with

the dogs. He could have pushed Undyne off or squirmed out from underneath Greater Dog's weight. Both of them were strong, but they couldn't be everywhere at once.

"I mean, of *course* I was always going to trade you for Sans when he was dumb enough to offer himself up instead! His powers are so much more *fun* than yours!"

All he was really doing was holding Flowey off. And he wasn't even doing that as well as he needed to. Papyrus could feel a creeper twining around the gap in his upper arm bones, roots sneaking into his boots. It was going to happen again.

"But *you* were a lot easier to make cooperate! And you hit a lot harder than I thought you were capable of! And too many people love you to ever risk setting you on fire. ***Maybe we can still have fun!***"

He had to call for help but he couldn't put anyone else in danger like this. Papyrus wasn't sure he could have drawn in the breath to speak anyway. He thought he heard himself whimpering, at least, as a vine crept up towards his eye.

Several things happened next, in very quick succession.

A fireball shot over Papyrus' head, hot enough that he could feel the heat even in that brief instant. It hit Flowey forcibly in the face, and actually sent the flower flying through the air, momentarily uprooted from the ground. Just like that, all the creepers and vines keeping him tied to the ground were nothing more than dead, inert plant matter.

After that instant of shock passed, Papyrus immediately set back to work tearing himself free. This time, he even had help, as Sans almost seemed to materialize beside him. His brother was there to help unbind Papyrus, there to offer him a hand up. Papyrus took it. When he next found himself shoved protectively behind Sans, Papyrus didn't even protest, just for once.

Especially since it was only then that he noticed that Sans hadn't arrived alone. Papyrus looked up, and his eyesockets widened to recognize Queen Toriel standing there beside them. She spared him a smile in turn, before looking back at Flowey with a cold, stern glare.

"hey, fertilizer food," Sans growled at Flowey. *"Stay the hell away from my brother."*

Flowey let out a hiss from where he'd fallen, from where he was

already digging his roots back down into the ground. “Or *what*? *You’ll* stop me?”

Sans held up a hand. The air over his shoulder seemed to shimmer and twist strangely. “i’ve done it before.”

“Never with your brother watching!”

Sans went still. Papyrus didn’t know how to feel about that. On the one hand, it was always a relief to hear that Sans was just as adamant about not hurting anyone as Papyrus was. To see him stop even now, even after everything Flowey had put him through…Papyrus was proud of Sans. Even if Sans was only stopping because Papyrus was there to see him, that *meant* something. Being there to see him and guide him was what Papyrus was supposed to do, after all.

“you know,” said Sans, sounding surprisingly calm. “that is a very good point.”

On the other hand, faced with the idea that this nightmare might never end, Papyrus felt exhausted beneath the unfamiliar weight of dread as much as from the fight.

Sans, however, seemed unbothered. He lowered his hand and simply shrugged. His back was to his brother, and so Papyrus couldn’t see the look on Sans’ face. His voice, however, was clear and steady and maybe even a little amused.

“so you know what? i’m not gonna do a damn thing.” Sans stepped back, reached over to take Papyrus’ hand, and now from this angle Papyrus could even see him wink at the flower. “besides. from the look of things, my good buddy here has a *royal bone* to pick with you.”

Papyrus allowed himself a modicum of satisfaction, as he plainly saw the exact second where Flowey properly realized that Sans hadn’t arrived alone, either.

The Queen stepped forward, shaking with rage.

“I thought,” she said, each word falling like a boulder from the mountain itself. “That if I let you go, that if I did not chase you, then you would find your way back to the proper path in your own time. I never dreamed that even after all you had lost, you would treat others like this! No more. No longer. Whatever help you need, I will not risk it coming at the expense of my people. Sans, Papyrus, will you be all

right to go home on your own? I believe it is long overdue that I had another talk with my child."

Chapter End Notes

Tune in next time when we finish this wild ride!

To Be Made Whole

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“SANS…SANS, WH-WHAT’S GOING ON?”

“it’s okay, papyrus, it’s gonna be okay, just s-stay with me…”

“I CAN’T SEE YOU…EVERYTHING HURTS SO MUCH…”

“i know. i know, and i’m so sorry. i’m gonna fix this, bro, just hang on…”

“Oh? And just how do you plan to do that, Sans?”

It shouldn’t have been at all surprising to see Flowey forcing himself out through one of Papyrus’ eyesockets. Sans still felt dizzy with horror at the confirmation of just who was responsible.

His brother was bound and trapped in roots and thorny, flowering vines. They extended out from under his clothes, twisted around his limbs, up and over his spine. His eyesockets were blinded with them, they were even looped around his jaw in a way that suggested even being “allowed” to talk was a recent change. Sans could see him trying to twitch and strain against the restraints, but the mind behind them was stronger. It was strong enough to effortlessly turn his brother into a puppet, no matter how much pain it caused him. Papyrus had actually been made to attack *him, after being made to call Sans to come meet him in front of the Ruins in the first place. Flowey had already dug himself in deep.*

The revelation that it was Flowey who had taken control should have been the least surprising revelation ever. Indeed, after the initial shock faded, Sans found himself feeling something else – a desperate flicker of hope.

He thought very, very quickly about what to do next. In the end, he could still see only one way to go.

“come on, flowey,” Sans said, holding out his arms and grinning weakly up at his old enemy. “quit kidding around. you and I both know that this… this isn’t about my brother.”

“Actually, Sans, I kind of think it is. I’m getting a little tired of being stuck like this. I wanted a nice change of pace, a body of my own. And of course your brother was nice enough to help an old friend out!”

“if you want to take a body…would you really be satisfied with taking papyrus’ instead of mine?”

All was silent for a long moment, enough that Sans thought he could hear the sound of snowflakes falling.

Finally, Flowey leaned forward, extending himself further from Papyrus’ eyesocket as he did so. For an instant, Sans considered taking advantage of the moment of consideration in order to attack. In the next instant, he brutally shoved that thought aside. He couldn’t risk Papyrus like that. Not if there was another way.

“Of course not. Your powers are way more fun than his. And you’re so much stronger. And if I was in your head, you’d *be out of my life. But honestly, Sans. You and I both know that Papyrus was the easier target. You wouldn’t have let me in without a really annoying fight.”*

“well. i’m letting you in without a fight now. c’mon.” Sans gestured at himself, and then spread his arms in invitation. “come and get me.”

“NO…!”

“it’s okay, papyrus. just trust me.”

“And that’s *how I know you’re bluffing, Sans!” With a disgusted scoff, Flowey started to pull away.*

Sans felt desperation blooming in his ribcage. He let it bloom, let it ring in his voice as he cried out: “you’re hurting my brother! of course *I’m not bluffing! have i ever, when he’s involved? are you really going to ignore* everything *i let you get away with while you could reset, just on the off chance you’d feel like keeping him safe? come* on*, flowey. you know me better than that.”*

Flowey froze. Flowey knew Sans was right.

Flowey still said: “Prove it.”

But he didn’t attack or make Papyrus attack, as Sans stepped forward and gently took his brother’s hands in both of his own. Immediately, the creepers twined around his fingers began to squirm and writhe like worms, untangling themselves so slowly from one skeleton’s bones and inching their way around the other’s.

Sans let it all happen. In fact, it was Papyrus who visibly struggled to pull away. It was impossible to tell with him blinded as he was. But Papyrus

could plainly still hear, and Sans could pick up the note of tears in his brother's voice.

"S-SANS…DON'T…"

Flowey visibly rolled his eyes, and Sans wasn't sure if he had ever hated that little golden flower more. "Be quiet a sec, Papyrus," he snapped, and Papyrus let out a startled cry that was quickly muffled as his jaw was once again strapped shut.

Sans felt tears gathering in his eyes. He wanted so, so much to act, to fight, to save his brother. But he knew that any move he made would just be giving Flowey more opportunities and excuses to hurt him. That was always how it had worked. Sans couldn't be sure that he could force Flowey to let go before Papyrus wound up seriously injured, or worse.

One thing he was certain of was that he could present a more enjoyable target.

Their hands were bound together now, and Sans could feel Flowey slithering further up his arms, twining along his bones. It wasn't painful, not yet. It was just profoundly disgusting, invasive, violating. *He could feel a web being drawn tighter around his soul, a web he would be powerless to resist on his own once it closed.*

Sans let it happen. He looked up at his brother, listened to Papyrus' desperate attempts to speak with him, plead with him, and he smiled.

"it's okay, bro," he said, keeping his voice warm and gentle, feeling proud of himself that it only shook a little. "it's gonna be okay. i know you'll come and get me. i know you'll make this right. just…just let me handle this for now, okay? let me help. i know it hurts, and i'm so sorry, and… and hey, h-how about a story? just to pass the time, hehehe…"

Papyrus was quiet before he got halfway through the bedtime story. Sans didn't know if that was because he had really been calmed down, or just because he couldn't react anymore.

Either way, he wasn't surprised at all when Papyrus collapsed into the snow like a puppet with broken strings after Flowey finally extricated himself from his victim's skull. Sans still wanted to go to him, to check on him. But he could only take one step forward before the vines around him flexed in warning and held him tight.

"Don't think that means you're off the hook, Sans," the flower said sternly, from where he was settled in Sans' palm.

Sans nodded, but otherwise didn't answer. He looked down at Papyrus, laying limp in the snow, and steeled himself.

Then, moving fast enough that even Flowey cried out in alarm, Sans leapt over his brother and set off at a dash into yawning darkness of the Ruins. He could have teleported himself over there in an instant with his powers. But the longer he kept them out of Flowey's hands, the better off everyone would be.

Flowey fought him every step of the way. Sans fought back, and at least kept his old enemy from winning until he'd gone as far as he could.

* * *

"SANS?"

Sans twitched a little, drawn back to the present day by the sound of his brother's voice. They were walking together through the woods, side-by-side, back towards home. The sound of Toriel's voice and Flowey's had long since faded into the distance.

"yeah, papyrus?"

"YOU DIDN'T ANSWER ME."

"what was the question?" Sans asked, noting with a guilty twinge that he remembered the question all too well.

"IS IT TRUE?" Papyrus was wringing his hands anxiously, his gaze on his feet. Sans couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his brother looking so anxious and lost. "WHAT…WHAT FLOWEY SAID, ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED?"

"flowey likes to talk, in case you haven't noticed. you'll, uh, you'll have to be more specific, papyrus."

"ABOUT IT BEING MY FAULT?"

"if he said that, then yep. flowey was lying." Except it wasn't that simple, and they both knew it. Sans heaved a sigh, and forced himself to carry on. Word by word, step by step. "but if he mentioned something to you about me letting him take over my body because he, um, he already took over yours, then…yeah. yeah, that much is true."

"SO IT *WAS* ALL MY FAULT!" Papyrus' expression twisted as though he was about to cry. Out of everything Sans had endured over the last

day or so, he thought that if he had to see his brother cry, that really would break him.

"*no*," Sans said stubbornly, reaching up to squeeze his brother's hand as though for emphasis. "it's *flowey's* fault, papyrus. and it's over now."

"BUT IF I HADN'T LET MYSELF GET CAUGHT LIKE THAT, THEN YOU WOULDN'T HAVE…"

"he would have found a way. he obviously wanted to take things that far. don't know why."

"HE MENTIONED THE HUMAN."

"did he? huh. yeah, he was probably hoping for them to come back. maybe so he could take their soul, maybe just so he could have someone new to mess with. things obviously didn't go his way. guess he decided to throw a temper tantrum."

"THE QUEEN DID CALL HIM 'HER CHILD'…"

"you noticed that, huh?"

"WHY IS THAT?"

"no idea. asgore would talk like that sometimes, though, about the flowers in his throne room. maybe it's just a boss monster thing."

"MAYBE…"

Silence fell between them, for a little while. Sans found himself increasingly distracted from the world around him by the sharp ache that was growing in his hands and along his face. He knew now, after his flight from Undyne's house, to recognize it as a sign that he'd been out in the snow too long. Then again, Sans supposed this was the longest he'd been outside, other than that night, since before this mess had started. By rights, he probably should have just teleported them both home. But he was tired, and he knew Papyrus was tired, and so by unspoken agreement they just decided to stay settled in one another's company for a little while longer, before facing the world again.

He rubbed his hands together, stuck them in his pocket, and then folded them under his arms when even that proved insufficient. Sans cast his gaze somewhat longingly ahead, but the bridge back into

Snowdin was only just visible through the trees. All the while, he felt Papyrus' gaze on him. All the while, he felt his brother trying to psyche himself up.

"SANS?"

"yeah, bro?"

"WHY DID YOU ASK FLOWEY TO…TO DO THAT, TO YOU? I MEAN, I KNOW IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN GREAT, WATCHING ALL OF THAT HAPPEN TO SOMEONE AS COOL AS ME. BUT…BUT I DIDN'T WANT ANY OF IT TO HAPPEN TO YOU, EITHER! IT'S NOT FAIR THAT WE HAVE TO PICK BETWEEN US!"

"...i know. i'm sorry. i mean..." Here Sans heaved a sigh. "i'm not sorry that i *did* it, honestly. just sorry that it came to that. i just...i didn't want to see you hurting. and i know you didn't like seeing me hurting, either. but the fact is that i was the only one in a position to make that call. so i took it. maybe that was selfish of me, but hey." Sans shrugged dolefully. "i can be kind of a selfish guy."

"I DISAGREE WITH THAT. I DISAGREE WITH THAT INTENSELY AND PASSIONATELY."

He didn't sound as though he did, but they were both pretty tired. Sans found himself smiling, anyway, feeling his soul burning a little brighter even if his hands were starting to go numb from the cold again. "thanks, papyrus. nice of you. and, uh, honestly? part of why i was so gung-ho about making that trade? it's because i figured that you and everyone else would have a way better chance of saving me than i would have of saving you."

"I DISAGREE WITH THAT, TOO. BUT...SINCE I GUESS WE DID SAVE YOU IN THE END, IT DOESN'T MATTER NOW, RIGHT?"

"yeah. you did." Sans grinned happily up at his brother, and he even meant it. "and it doesn't."

Papyrus beamed down at him, as well. But the expression slowly faded to one of acute concern, something that made Sans' soul stutter to see. "SANS..."

He reached out to rest a hand on the smaller skeleton's shoulders, and Sans obligingly came to a stop. Papyrus moved around to kneel down in front of him, and then reached out a hand towards Sans' face.

"I KNEW IT!" he cried, when Sans reflexively flinched away with a wince. "HONESTLY, SANS, WHEN WILL YOU START TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF?"

"in my defense, i'm still getting used to this being a thing i need to worry about," Sans mumbled, looking away in embarrassment. "the jacket's always been enough, before now."

"WELL IT OBVIOUSLY ISN'T ANYMORE! YOU WILL NEED A PROPER SCARF. *AND* SOME GLOVES TOO, IF I'M ANY JUDGE, AND THERE IS NO BETTER JUDGE THAN ME!"

"oh, yeah? you got a spare scarf lying around? because otherwise, i don't see how that matters until we get home."

"WELL, WHILE I DO NOT HAVE A *SPARE* SCARF..."

And Sans gasped in shock and disbelief as Papyrus reached up and began to unwrap *the* scarf from around his shoulders. Even after he'd stopped wearing his battle body on a daily basis, he'd always held on to that scarf.

Except for now, as he reached over to wind it carefully around Sans' face instead. Sans found that he could only stand there, staring up at his brother with wide eyesockets and bright eyelights, trembling faintly in awe.

Papyrus stood back with his hands on his hips to admire the effect. "WELL. IT DOES NOT LOOK *QUITE* AS COOL ON YOU AS IT DOES ON ME! BUT THAT IS ONLY TO BE EXPECTED! IT WILL SUFFICE, FOR NOW, UNTIL WE CAN WORK TOGETHER TO MAKE YOU YOUR *OWN* SUPER COOL SCARF! AND YOUR OWN SUPER COOL GLOVES, OF COURSE."

"yeah," Sans mumbled, his voice muffled by the scarf. "yeah..." He stared up at his brother, his wonderful brother. Papyrus had never let him down, had never not been there. Even before Flowey had taken over Sans' body, Papyrus had always been there to give him a reason to get out of bed, to encourage him to be better, to *believe* in him. After Flowey, Papyrus had been there to soothe him when the nightmares came, to make sure he went outside, to encourage him to live again.

Papyrus was the best possible brother anyone could ask for. Sans was lucky to have him.

He would never forget that, every day for as long as he lived. There and then, Sans chose to show as much by throwing his arms around his brother in a fierce hug. Papyrus stumbled back a pace in apparent surprise, but then let out a hearty: "NYEH-HEH-HEH!" before kneeling down to return the hug.

For a moment, everything was okay. And even when they finally pulled apart to continue the walk back home, things were still pretty good. Sans kept his hands buried deep in his pockets, for all the good it would do. As it happened, it did do some good in reminding him all over again about the paper he'd held on to from Alphys. He didn't mention it right away, though. Good news needed a good delivery. Otherwise, the two of them talked about nothing very much for the time it took for them to get across the bridge, back into town, and on the approach to Grillby's.

It was then that Sans stopped, staring thoughtfully up at the second floor of the building. Papyrus stopped a few steps ahead, glancing worriedly back at him.

"what time is it?"

Papyrus made to pull his phone out, and then frowned and shrugged helplessly. Sans was forced to pull out his phone instead, to check the time.

It turned out to be early morning. Even after the night they'd all had, maybe Grillby would be up and getting ready to open. Sans had never known him to miss a day.

"i think i'm gonna stop in and check on grillby. let him know that things are okay now." Sans looked back at Papyrus with a worried frown. "mind if i meet you back at home, bro?"

"WELL..." Papyrus frowned, folding his hands together anxiously again, staring down at his feet. "OF COURSE I DON'T MIND, BUT...I WAS KIND OF HOPING WE COULD EAT AT HOME, TODAY? I COULD MAKE AN ESPECIALLY IMPRESSIVE DINNER, IN CELEBRATION OF OUR GRAND TRIUMPH TODAY!"

Was that all? Sans laughed with relief, the cloud of dread passing almost before it had had a chance to form. "we still can, bro," he hastened to reassure his brother. "i just want to stop in and say 'hi'. and to let him know not to look for me during the dinner rush. only polite, y'know?"

"I SUPPOSE SO. ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE DATING, NOW."

"right. but i'll be right home after that. sentry's honor. and, hey, speaking of celebrations...maybe add this to the list of reasons."

He pulled the paper out of his pocket, then unfolded and made a great play of smoothing it out before he passed it up to Papyrus. "take a look at what alphys found on me."

Papyrus took the paper and held it up to his face, close enough that Sans couldn't see his expression as he read.

He knew the exact minute where Papyrus understood just what he was reading, though. He knew, because Papyrus let out a wild whoop of delight, and Sans found himself swept up into a hug so enthusiastic that his feet left the ground. Papyrus actually swung him in a circle, and Sans laughed to feel it.

"DO YOU REALLY...?"

"i really do. i know, i didn't believe it myself at first!"

"SANS, THIS IS *WONDERFUL*! THIS CALLS FOR A CELEBRATION TO END ALL CELEBRATIONS! THIS MIGHT CALL FOR *CAKE*! OR MAYBE EVEN *PIE*!"

"i know you can make it happen, bro."

"ABSOLUTELY! WELL, NOW YOU POSITIVELY *HAVE* TO GO AND SAY HELLO TO GRILLBY! TO TELL HIM THE NEWS! AND TO STAY OUT OF THE WAY WHILE I SET UP THE SURPRISE PARTY!"

"makes sense to me."

Papyrus set him down carefully in the snow, and beamed down at Sans as Sans beamed up at him. Then his brother turned away and dashed full-tilt for home, laughing heartily all the way. Sans watched him go, watched Papyrus leap up onto the porch, and watched the door close behind him. He smiled all the while, his soul feeling warm and bright.

Then he went inside the restaurant in search of his best friend. The front door was unlocked. It always was. Even if anyone in Snowdin had ever wanted to rob Grillby, they would never have risked the wrath of the dogs in doing so. The main dining area inside was still empty, though the smell of soap and polish lay particularly heavy in

the air. That meant that Grillby would have moved on to cleaning up the kitchen.

Sans moved carefully through the sea of tables and chairs, but hesitated for a moment when he reached the kitchen door.

He wondered if Grillby was doing dishes on the other side. The very last thing Sans wanted to do was surprise or startle him in the midst of that. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to be in that kitchen again at all. Sans still knocked carefully on the door anyway, and waited.

After a moment, he heard footsteps, and then the door opened to reveal Grillby standing there. His usual pair of yellow cleaning gloves were draped over the shoulder of his suit, but the presence of the spray bottle in his hand told Sans that he at least wasn't interrupting any fiddly work with the sink.

"Sans."

Grillby offered him a nod. Sans offered him a wave. "yo. this a good time?"

"Of course. Is everything all right?" Grillby stepped aside and motioned for Sans to enter. Sans did so, and moved to lean against the patch of counter where the rag was resting and the smell of cleaning solution was particularly sharp.

"man, i hope so. how about you? did you at least get some sleep?"

"A little. But when I saw it would be time to open soon, I...thought it might do me good, to get back to my routines."

"i know how that goes. and hey, if you need to keep going, don't mind me. i'll just try to stay out of your way."

"Thank you." And Grillby did indeed move past Sans to pick up the rag, reapply some cleaning solution to it, and resume polishing the countertop.

Sans left him to it, for a moment. He recognized the look of a man who mostly needed something to keep his hands busy. But at last, he spoke in the most casual tone he could muster.

“so, uh…just stopped by to let you know that we took care of flowey.”

"'Took care of'?" Grillby asked, with audible concern.

Sans winced. "yeah, okay, maybe not the best choice of words. more that, uh, we figured out why he was doing what he was doing, and what he was doing in the first place, and we stopped it. he's still *around*, but he's, y'know. not our problem anymore."

"Who's problem is he?"

"the queen's. i figure queens have got to be good at handling stuff, yeah?"

"I suppose." Grillby still looked somewhat dubious. Sans couldn't entirely blame him. But he also couldn't shake the sense that that wasn't all there was to it.

What the hell. It had been a weird day. Sans decided to go for broke.

"so about whatever he was saying to you…"

Grillby twitched, but it was a twitch bad enough to send the bottle of soap falling from his fingers and onto the floor. Sans hastily bent to pick it up and hand it back. Grillby took it, squirted some more onto his rag, and turned away to return to work.

"What about *whatever he was saying to me?"*

"what was it?"

"Does it matter now?"

"obviously it does, since you're shaking."

Grillby went still. Sans took a deep breath, and reached out to lay a hand on the elemental's arm. He felt Grillby tense for a moment, and then relax, letting out a puff of smoke.

"He spoke about…I still don't understand a great deal of it, myself. Other timelines. 'Resets'."

Sans couldn't help it. His grip tightened a little in shock, enough that Grillby looked down at him. "yeah. uh, yeah. that's a thing. or it, uh, it was a thing. i'll explain it to you later."

He saw Grillby's mouth draw into a thin, tight line. *"Please do."*

"but in the meantime, what was flowey trying to make the resets

mean to you?"

"He spoke of other versions of us. Times that we had already…confessed, and gotten involved." It was hard to tell when a fire elemental was blushing. Sans had still known Grillby long enough to tell, by the way his flames went a bit paler just under his eyes. His hands were shaking much more evidently, now. At least he still didn't pull away when Sans reached out to cover one hand with his.

After a moment, he even returned the hold, and Sans let out a breath. Grillby obviously needed the support, to brace himself for what he said next. His gaze didn't rise from the gleaming tabletop.

"And he told me that, in all of those other times, for all of those other versions of us…that we never work. It never lasts."

Silence fell between them for a long moment. Sans took a deep breath, and broke it first.

"honestly? that, uh, that doesn't surprise me."

"It doesn't?" Grillby darted a sidelong glance at him. Sans could tell that his friend wanted to hope even as he was mired in doubt. Sans couldn't blame him. He knew the taste of that doubt all too well, certainly enough to recognize it in others.

So he offered Grillby the most reassuring smile he could muster, squeezing his friend's hand. "nah. i mean, let's look at the obvious. you're always pretty busy, and i'm…well, let's be honest here. i'm always kind of a mess. the wrong time, the wrong place, the wrong talks…yeah. i can see where it wouldn't work out, sometimes."

"But only sometimes? The flower said…"

"right. 'never'. but grillby, here's the thing. i can't remember all the resets. especially not the early ones. but if flowey knew about us hooking up? he could just as easily have been the one to break us up. still technically true. flowey's good at 'technically true'. but a pretty different situation now that he's out of our hats." He squeezed Grillby's shoulder, and then spread his arms with the air of a magician pulling off a particularly good trick. "y'know?"

Grillby actually gasped aloud, putting a hand to his mouth. *"I never thought…"*

"of course you didn't." Sans smiled wryly. "flowey kinda has that

effect on people."

His friend smiled in sympathy at him. *"So I've gathered."* Then his expression faltered once more. *"But as for the other times…the wrong place, the wrong talk, the wrong circumstances, as you said…"*

"yeah?"

"All of this has hardly happened under the best of them."

His gaze lingered on Sans' face, on the scars that Sans knew were still visible over the top of the scarf. His gaze fell to the hand on his shoulder, the stained and blackened bones. Sans felt the urge to step back bubbling up in his soul, the urge to *run*.

With a supreme effort of will, he forced it down. He just widened an eyesocket at Grillby, and held up his other hand.

"don't tell me my appearance still 'grieves' you after all of this, grillby."

"Doesn't it grieve you?"

Sans grinned easily. "nah," he said, and meant it. "papyrus and i are gonna make some new cold weather gear. if it's half as cool as that old costume of his, i think i'll be in pretty great shape. and hey…" He tilted his head to regard the other monster's worried expression. "…i don't blame you, y'know. i never did. just never thought it needed *saying*."

"I just…don't know how I feel, entering a relationship with someone I've already left such marks on. Permanence can be a terrifying thing, Sans."

"don't have to tell me twice."

"Already, I've found myself wondering what will happen if things change between us, if you decide those marks aren't acceptable, if you can't *forgive me…"*

Sans silenced Grillby by taking his other hand. He moved quick as a cat, so that he didn't have time to lose his nerve, and suddenly his hand was closed over his friend's. And silence fell between them both.

Grillby felt strange to touch. Sans hadn't really been in a position to appreciate that before, but he could now. In truth, he felt like nothing

so much as touching a pocket of warm air that happened to have been compressed down into a basically human form. Every sense would tell you that somehow you should phase right through him, but you never did. Every sense would tell you that touching him like this should leave you scorched and agonized, but it never did. Even as flames licked over his bones, even as a few faint plumes of lingering smoke curled up in the air between them, Grillby's heat in that moment was no more than might be felt sticking your hand over a warm vent on a cold day. As long as he wasn't angry, that was as bad as it ever got, and it took a very great deal to rouse the bartender to anger.

Sans had always known that, of course, as long as they'd been friends. He nevertheless realized in that moment that he might still have… forgotten as much, for a little while. Maybe the memory had been chased out by the memory of mechanical flames and Flowey's screams. Maybe, in this, Sans really had been working too hard at pretending to be okay.

Now he remembered the good instead of the bad, and he felt a slow smile spread across his skull to realize it. Sans felt something warm and light buoying up his soul, like soap bubbles in sunlight, and then he realized it was laughter, the laughter of tension broken and relief found at last. Now that the moment was behind him, it seemed like such a simple thing to have ever worried about, but of course he only knew that now and he was so, so glad to.

"i forgive you *now*, you dork," he said happily. "and c'mon, grillby, you know me. i am *way* too lazy to ever change my mind about something like that."

Grillby heard this, saw this. He smiled, too, and was soon laughing right along with Sans. The sound was that of the crackle and pop of twigs in a blooming flame, and he reached out with his free hand to take hold of Sans' other one again. Warmth and light curled around his fingers, somehow serving to highlight the healing that had happened rather than the damage that remained. Gently, he drew Sans' hand over to rest it against the side of his face, the side where the flames were still a little pale and weak but where his eye really had recovered nicely.

Moving like he was just learning the steps of a dance, Sans did the same with Grillby's hand, pressing it to the side of his face where the bone was still a little discolored, and maybe would really always remain that way. But it didn't look so bad. The difference could hardly be seen, except by someone standing this close, and Grillby obviously

didn't seem to mind. What was more important was how nice the warmth felt directly on his bones, a warmth that seemed to go straight down to his soul.

Then Sans was enfolded by light as his friend hugged him and he hugged him back. They slumped to their knees there on the floor of the kitchen, and laughed happily and freely as they perhaps never had before. There in the kitchen where they had both nearly died in two different ways, Sans finally realized fully and completely that he was going to be okay.

* * *

They parted after moments that felt like hours. They parted after enough kisses to leave Sans feel like he was flying in sunlight. But in the end, Grillby went back to work. Sans went home. It was as though nothing had changed, except everything had. Things had changed back and things had changed for the better. Sans' steps felt light, and his bones felt warm.

More than anything, Sans realized that he *felt*. He was here and aware and alive more than he had been for so long, maybe even more than he had been before. He felt a cold breeze and snow crunching beneath his shoes, he felt the way his own bones moved together, and he felt his own breath on his face where the scarf caught it. Even the colors seemed brighter.

Otherwise, there was only one minor hiccup on the way home, and that was when he heard someone call his name. Sans glanced back, to see Toriel approaching. In her hands, she was carefully cradling a pot, into which a glowering Flowey had been shoved.

Sans and Flowey met one another's gazes. The flower ducked his head, the picture of sullenness, but said nothing. Maybe he couldn't, thanks to whatever magic was keeping him in the pot in the first place. Maybe he just didn't see the point.

"y'know," Sans said, addressing his words to Toriel even if he didn't look up. "if he's gonna be hanging around the castle, i'm gonna need a *lot* more vacation days."

"I am certain we can work something out," Toriel replied, offering him an apologetic smile.

"sure thing." Sans privately doubted it, but, well, stranger things had happened. "sail safe on the way back, okay?"

“Oh, don’t worry. The River Person’s skills are *unassailable*.”

Flowey proved that he had not been rendered incapable of speech by groaning aloud at both the pun and the laughter that followed it.

Then the Queen of the Underground turned and headed back towards the dock. Sans watched her go until she’d turned out of sight, his mind a whirl of thoughts.

Things might not get easier from here. But they would certainly at least be different, and that meant something.

From there, Sans took his time on the walk home. Even so, it was a great deal to take in all at once, a great deal to process all at once, and so he was already sleepy by the time he closed his own front door behind him. But it was his usual sleepiness, familiar as his own blanket, maybe even more familiar than his own bed. So that was okay.

Papyrus was on the phone, chatting away merrily with Undyne, pacing back and forth animatedly over the living room floor in front of the television. He paused at the sound of the door opening, looked back at Sans. Sans could see him opening his mouth, knew he was about to put Undyne on hold to check on Sans.

Sans shook his head in silent reply, and gave his brother a thumbs-up – *nothing to worry about*. He saw, in the way Papyrus beamed, that the other skeleton finally believed him. So Papyrus returned the thumbs-up and then turned back to continue his conversation, barely missing a beat. Sans, meanwhile, tromped up the stairs and to his bedroom door, leaving a trail of snow behind him. Papyrus would yell at him for that later. Sans wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Still, for now, a nap before dinner sounded just about perfect.

Maybe he’d even put the sheets on the bed this time.

Chapter End Notes

> This is the longest fanfiction I have ever written. This is probably the most intense fanfiction I have ever written. If you had told me four months ago that I would have written a full NaNo about this dork of a skeleton and his fire elemental boyfriend about the aftermath of getting possessed by a flower...well, I probably still would have believed you. This game does things to people. But overall, I think it's done good things to me.

I hope you all enjoyed the ride. Thank you for sticking it out to the end with me. And be sure to send some love ynfernalis' way for all her phenomenal beta work! This fic probably still wouldn't be done, if not for her. <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!